

WOMEN IN AFRICAN DRAMA:  
REPRESENTATION AND ROLE

by

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### DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Mrs Sarah N. Geteria and my late father Mr Rowland N. Geteria who taught me how to hold a pen.

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## ABSTRACT

Title: Women in African Drama: Representation and Role

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation and role of women in African theatre. The discussion is based on published and unpublished plays by African writers selected from a pan-African perspective.

The thesis is divided into two major parts: Women in Society; The Portrayal of Women by Major Playwrights. Part I follows a thematic approach aimed at examining the position of women in three different areas which form the chapters for the part: Women, Tradition and Social Change; The Urban Woman and Women in Politics. Part II of the thesis analyses major African playwrights' presentation of women characters. This part discusses not only the characterization of women by major playwrights but also these writers' attitude towards women and women's issues. Examined here in two chapters are The Portrayal of Women by Major Male Playwrights and The Portrayal of Women by Major Female Playwrights.

Chapter 1, 'Women, Tradition and Social Change' discusses selected playwrights' examination of African women's experiences in the traditional African setting as a major foundation of the present and future socio-political situation of the continent; this chapter is the springboard of the study.

From the traditional milieu the study then moves on to the



relatively new urban environment. This Chapter examines the predicaments in which the African woman finds herself as she struggles to survive in a world which differs significantly from the traditional one. Survival in the urban environment demands a certain degree of autonomy from communal ties on the part of the individual. Yet in the case of the African woman, society does not hesitate to censure her movements and even to point an accusing finger at her for failing to satisfy traditional expectations when she is genuinely trying to meet the challenges presented by life in towns.

The myth that a woman's place is exclusively in the kitchen is a widespread one the world over. A more negative myth found in Africa is that participation of women in public affairs leads to social disaster. The third chapter of this study examines the role of African women in politics in the traditional and contemporary periods.

The fourth chapter discusses the portrayal of women by major male playwrights. Of great significance in this analysis is the attitude of these male writers towards women and also towards issues affecting women. It is for this reason that cross-references are made between these male writers and the female playwrights examined in Chapter 5.

Very negligible research has been done on drama by African women. It is in recognition of this unfortunate situation that the fifth and last chapter of this thesis is dedicated to women's self-perception as reflected in their portrayal of fellow-women in theatre. This chapter examines only major female playwrights; the minor female playwrights are examined alongside the male in the appropriate areas in Chapters 1 to 3.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first and foremost responsibility of a researcher in an emotional and controversial field such as gender politics is to clarify his/her own position in the issue. Although I recognize that my position in the woman question is implicit from the direction I take in analysing the plays selected for this study, a brief explicit statement about my position serves, not only as an introductory remark, but more significantly as a pointer to elucidate the very approach I take in the discussion.

My interest in a topic on the position of women of Africa is rooted in the fact that I am a woman, an African woman, and I am sensitive to the plight of women. Secondly, I am an educationist as well as a theatre artist. As a teacher and an actress I see it as my responsibility to use my talents in contributing towards developing the kind of drama which can influence African societies in building up positive attitudes towards women.

African women have played a very crucial role in the development and general nurturance of their societies both in the traditional and the contemporary periods. As mothers, they are the core of the family which in turn is the foundation of the nation. In terms of work input, women are the feeders of their nations. In a research done recently for the Fourth United Nations World Food Day on 16th October, 1984, it was found that African women contributed about two-thirds of all the



hours spent in traditional agriculture and three-fifths of the time spent in marketing.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in spite of African women's contributions to their societies, they are not given the credit they deserve and they are often victims of oppression in its various manifestations: exploitation, discrimination and general social prejudice. Where women occupy prestigious positions or have gained significant autonomy, they have had to struggle much harder than the men in order to move from inferior positions or gain independence.<sup>2</sup>

It is my strong belief that the major problem which needs to be tackled if African women are to be liberated from all forms of oppression is the area of attitudes. These are attitudes which reflect men's perception of women and women's self-perception as well. On a national level, for instance, attitudes towards women determine the way in which issues affecting women are handled when policies are made.

The theatre is a very powerful tool for influencing attitudes and social change. As a written as well as a performed art, drama presents the picture of a situation more clearly than prose fiction and poetry, and by the same token it provokes people more sensitively. This is the point made by Henrik Sjogren when he argues:

/drama/ is the most direct of all artistic forms. It confronts living beings with other living beings and in this immediate correspondence between its practitioners and its recipients lies the theatre's superiority over all other art forms.<sup>3</sup>

In Africa, especially, drama occupies a very special place.

Unlike the novel which is a foreign literary genre, drama has been an

indigenous art in Africa since time immemorial. A second point that is significant about drama in the African context is the fact that it can be seen and heard and therefore one does not need to be literate to appreciate it. This is important because the majority of the population of the African continent are those who cannot read and write.

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation and role of women in African drama. The role of women in African literature is an area which is increasingly attracting the interest of critics. Yet very little research has been done on this subject in the area of drama. Critics who are interested in the subject of women seem to avoid drama while those who have done extensive criticism on drama have not given due attention to the subject of women.

Ngambika, Studies of Women in African Literature<sup>4</sup> is one of the most extensively researched studies on the role of women in African literature. But the critics here give only a token recognition of women's role in African drama. Out of the twenty-two essays which comprise this work, only one examines dramatic works. It is surprising that even a writer like Ama Ata Aidoo who is best known as a playwright is given space in this work only as a novelist and a short-story writer.<sup>5</sup> In The Writing of Wole Soyinka<sup>6</sup> and Movement of Transition<sup>7</sup> Eldred Jones and Oyin Ogunba, respectively, show negligible awareness of the important role played by women in Wole Soyinka's drama.

The only comprehensive works of literary criticism which give some importance to the role of women in African drama so far are Michael



Etherton's The Development of African Drama<sup>8</sup> and Lloyd Brown's Women Writers in Black Africa.<sup>9</sup> However, even in these two works, there is a vacuum left by the omission of the role of women in African drama by male playwrights.

Although this research is concerned with gender politics and the position of women in Africa, it deliberately avoids the use of the term 'feminism' for two reasons: in the first place, the term 'feminism' is a western concept and the sphere it embraces includes elements which are irrelevant in the African context. Secondly, the study is essentially concerned with the way in which African theatre deals with the situation of women; it is not concerned with feminism.

The plays examined in this study have been selected from a pan-African perspective of the continent; the research does not restrict itself to geographical or linguistic barriers. This is in recognition of the fact that, to use Chinua Achebe's words, 'Africa is not only a geographical expression, it is also a metaphysical landscape - it is, in fact a view of the world and the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position'.<sup>10</sup> It is in this spirit that the study has not limited itself to works written in English but has included some in French and Kiswahili.

This study looks at literature as a creative medium which articulates cultural values and subsequently as a great contributor to social development. Many critics and creative writers have observed that African literature is not art for art's sake but, on the contrary, it is creative writing which has specific social

functions to play. According to Wole Soyinka, the role of the African creative writer is 'to function as the traditional African artist has as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time'.<sup>11</sup> Chinua Achebe is even more blunt on this fundamental role of African literature. To him, an African creative writer's duty is to struggle for social justice.<sup>12</sup>

With the function of the role of African literature in mind, a critic cannot escape the duty of evaluating the extent to which a piece of creative writing contributes towards social development. It is for this reason that the question of how far playwrights have articulated values and exposed negative attitudes towards women is considered a pertinent one in this study.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

- 1 'Women: The Missing Link in Development Programmes' Viva Magazine (Nairobi, November 1984), pp.14-15 & 59.
- 2 See, for example, Christine Obbo, African Women in their Struggle for Economic Independence, London, Zed Press, 1980.
- 3 Henrik Sjogren, Stage and Society in Sweden, Uddevalla, Bohuslanigens A B, 1979, p.25.
- 4 Carole B. Davies & Anne A. Graves (ed.), Ngambika, Studies of Women in African Literature, Trenton, New Jersey, Africa World Press, 1986.
- 5 See Chinalum Nwankwo, 'The Feminist Impulse and Social Realism in Ama Ata Aidoo's No Sweetness Here and Our Sister Killjoy', Ibid., pp.151-160.
- 6 Eldred D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, London, Heinemann, 1975.
- 7 Oyin Ogunba, A Movement of Transition, A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1975.
- 8 Michael Etherton, The Development of African Drama, London, Anchor Press, 1982.
- 9 Lloyd Brown, Women Writers in Black Africa, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1981.
- 10 Chinua Achebe, 'Thoughts on the African Novel', in Morning Yet on Creation Day by C. Achebe, London, Heinemann, 1975.
- 11 Wole Soyinka, 'The Writer in a Modern African State', in The Writer in Modern Africa (ed.) by Per Wastberg, Uppsala, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968.
- 12 See, for example in the following two essays by the novelist: 'The Black Writer's Burden', Présence Africaine, Vol.31, No.59, 3rd Quarterly, (1966), pp.135-148, and 'The African Writer and the Biafran Cause', Morning Yet on Creation Day, pp.78-84 (84) op.cit.

P A R T I

W O M E N I N S O C I E T Y



## CHAPTER 1

WOMEN, TRADITION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Literature is a vehicle for articulating culture and it has to develop as progressively as the culture it articulates. Written African literature and its criticism have moved through a few phases, the longest of which tackled themes connected with colonialism. Criticism against colonialism has now been superseded by themes in which Africa is called upon to re-examine herself instead of blaming the West for the cultural confusion in the continent. Of great importance in this task of self-evaluation is a look at Africa's cultural roots.

Traditional cultures of Africa still play a very important part in the contemporary African social context. Indeed, some of the political and social upheavals of Africa have their roots in the antagonism between the traditional and the Western cultures, or so-called 'modern' cultures. Critics of African literature recognize the importance of African traditional cultures as a basis for literary criticism.

Emmanuel Obiechina looks at traditional cultures as an ideological basis. He says:

Where the modern Western novelist might derive his signposts from Freudian psychology, Marxian dialectics or existentialist philosophy, the African novelist finds cues in traditional beliefs and values which determine the psychological responses of the characters born and bred within traditional society.



The question which a researcher in women's affairs cannot afford to ignore is whether the traditional period of Africa was as ideal as claimed by those scholars who are dissatisfied with the present transitional period. Note, for example, the sentiments expressed by Dr Hannah Kinoti at the End of Women's Decade Conference in Nairobi in July 1985:

In traditional Kenya every individual lived in total harmony with the members of his/her community; the husband with the wife (or wives), the son or daughter with his/her parents, the brother with the sister, the sister with the brother and so on. The traditional Kenyan cultures were organized in such a way as to provide facilities for bringing up a socially-integrated individual.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional African cultures were not all-embracing in satisfying the individual members of a given community. There were strengths in various traditions, but there were also weaknesses which had adverse effects on certain members of a given community. Various aspects of culture affected both men and women; however, there were those which affected one sex, one group of people or even one individual more than others.

It is our contention that members of a given community who are weaker in terms of social recognition have more cultural problems to cope with than those members who find themselves in higher social hierarchies. This is certainly the case with women in traditional Africa and in the subsequent transitional period; the transition between traditionalism and modernism introduced during the contact between Africa and the West.

There are a number of questions connected with traditional African

cultures which we would like to take as the fundamental background to the drama examined in this chapter. What is the role of women in a given community? How are women viewed by other members of their community and how do women perceive themselves with regard to their participation in the affairs of their particular communities? How do the various beliefs and practices affect the status of women in society and women's existence as individuals within their communities?

In traditional Africa, among many communities and especially those based on the patriarchal social systems, women occupied a very low social status. Even in matriarchal communities women were not completely liberated from social discrimination. It is true they lived among their blood relatives unlike their counterparts in the patriarchal communities who lived among their in-laws; yet even here women did not enjoy total independence from the men as important decisions were made on their behalf by their brothers. There were various traditional beliefs and practices which helped maintain the low social status of women. Details of these beliefs and practices differed from community to community and in some cases from one geographical region to another. However, since this study looks at the continent from a pan-African perspective, we shall consider those beliefs and practices which are connected to broad human relations and which were prevalent in most of Africa, regardless of ethnic or geographical setting.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how selected African playwrights respond to and therefore represent the position and role of women in the traditional social context and in the context of changing social values. The pillar on which our discussion stands is

comprised of those traditional beliefs and practices which playwrights view as affecting the position of women during both of these phases.

This chapter is divided into five sections each of which examines selected playwrights' handling of the place of women in relation to particular beliefs and practices. Under 'Women and Chastity' are examined those beliefs and practices connected to women's sex life, especially those which affect their eligibility for marriage. The section on 'Women and Initiation' examines the social problems connected with the initiation of women at adolescence particularly during the period of social change. 'Women, Marriage and Bride Price' examines attitudes towards daughters and wives and how these attitudes are influenced by the tradition of bride-price. The plight of women in polygamous marriages is examined under the section entitled 'Women, Marriage and Polygamy'. The last section of the chapter examines what is considered as the most important role of women in traditional Africa, that is, the role of women as mothers.

#### Women and Chastity

Lusigi Ayodi (M) Kenya:	<u>The Pumpkins</u> 1980
Ruth Kamau (F) Kenya:	<u>The Purity Test</u> 1982
Florentine Orwa (F) ) Grace Ogot (F) )	Kenya: <u>The White Veil</u> 1968; 1982
Elvania Zirimu (F) Uganda:	<u>The Family Spear</u> 1973

In many traditional African communities a woman's behaviour is censored according to the expectations of the community about her role



as a future wife and mother. It is felt that, since a woman's major role in traditional communities is that of wife and mother, it is crucial to ensure that a sense of commitment is ingrained in a young woman prior to marriage. Among many communities, this sense of commitment is ensured through sexual discipline. This is the root of the practice whereby women are forbidden to have sexual relations before marriage and proof of virginity is required as a prerequisite to acceptance as a worthy bride.

In some communities, the sheet used on the wedding night has to be exposed after the consummation of the marriage to provide evidence that the bride was a virgin prior to marriage. Among the Baganda of Uganda, for example, proof of virginity is so important that if a bride's relatives know that she is not a virgin they make her sit in a specially prepared herbal solution for long hours prior to the wedding so that at the consummation of marriage she can provide the evidence required.

Among the Bemba of Zambia, if a bride does not prove to be a virgin the bridegroom is allowed to demand part of or all the lobola (engagement price) or to reject the bride altogether. The Ibo of Nigeria are particularly strict on the issue of a woman's virginity before marriage. During the last stage of the marriage negotiations, quite apart from the bride price given to the father, the mother of the bride is given a token as an acknowledgement of the daughter's virginity. This is an honourable recognition that the mother has brought up her daughter in an upright manner. If, however, after

this token has been given the daughter is found not to be a virgin, she and her family are humiliated when the token is demanded back or when she is rejected and sent back to her own home in shame. The explanation that a bride was not a virgin is given through a symbol which is very humiliating for the bride to take back to her parents: a sheet with a big hole cut in the middle.

African playwrights have approached the issue of virginity in differing ways and areas of emphasis differ from play to play. There are playwrights who show great concern about the way in which the issue of virginity affects women as individuals as well as with regard to their position in society. On the other hand there are playwrights who merely use the issue of virginity as a springboard for their drama without necessarily showing any sympathies for their women characters.

In The Pumpkins<sup>3</sup>, Lusigi Ayodi uses the defilement of a young girl merely as a spectacular event to start off his play rather than as part of an examination of the plight of women in traditional Africa. There is a discrepancy between the picture we are given at the beginning of the play and the ensuing drama. When the play opens, we are shown Ameyo wearing a blood-stained costume, staggering and crying with pain after she has been raped by three boys from her village. This arouses our curiosity about the plight of this girl and we are anxious to follow her throughout the play to see how she manages to live in a traditional society having lost her virginity at such a tender age. However, the playwright disappoints us by deserting Ameyo and concentrating on Khanasimba, her father, instead. Ameyo's



defilement then becomes a mere appendage to Khanasimba's many problems.

It is not clear why Ayodi distances this problem, not only from Ameyo but also from her mother. Yet it is more realistic to consider the problem as affecting the mother more than the father since traditionally mothers are regarded as the guardians of their daughters' morality and often face severe criticism from their communities if their daughters do not turn out as expected. Ayodi's failure to relate the problem of loss of virginity closely to the victim minimizes the implications of an experience which has such terrible repercussions on women in traditional Africa. In addition, it appears somewhat male-chauvinistic to see a problem affecting women only in terms of its effect on men.

Unlike Ayodi, Ruth Kamau in The Purity Test<sup>4</sup> places the issue of virginity in the context of an initiation rite. A significant comparison can be made as regards the two playwrights' emphasis and sensitivity to the plight of women in traditional Africa.

Kamau's major point of focus is the predicament of a young woman who has to go against the traditional rite of the purity test yet she cannot make a permanent break from her community owing to a strong bond of love. Harisha is in love with the chief's son and she has lost her virginity in the course of their love relationship. But for the playwright, the important thing is not her heroine's loss of virginity per se but the agony she undergoes as she watches the painful experiences of her fellow-initiates. The playwright emphasizes the pain inflicted on the girls during the rite; a man's hand is used to

check whether a girl is a virgin. Although the playwright uses a dramatic trick to avoid showing the whole ceremony, the little we see makes us understand the girls' fear and Harisha's subsequent decision to run away.

Unlike Ayodi, Kamau does not distance her heroine's problem from the victim herself. Rather than emphasize the effect of Harisha's untraditional act of pre-marital sex on her family as Ayodi does with his heroine, Kamau emphasizes its effect on the heroine herself. Harisha's suffering is emphasized not only in connection with her agony at the purity test ceremony, but also during the period she spends away from home. Her suffering in the bush, though somewhat romantic, is a constant reminder to the audience about Harisha's deprivation of love at a time when she needs it most, that is, during her pre-marital pregnancy.

The love between Harisha and the chief's son is put above tradition. Just as Harisha risks losing her reputation and her place in the community by sleeping with the chief's son before marriage and by her flight from the village, so does the chief's son risk losing his prestigious position as the successor to the chief. Though perhaps unconscious on Kamau's part, the reunion between the two lovers has symbolic overtones; that is the triumph of love over what she presents as cruel traditionalism. Ruth Kamau is a woman and she wrote The Purity Test when she was a high school student. Perhaps this is why she is able to identify so closely with her heroine's experiences in a way which is difficult for Ayodi to do.

During the wave of modernism which swept across Africa at the introduction of Western values, women found themselves in a predicament. This is because the men wanted to take advantage of the freedom from traditional moral codes where they had something to gain. For example, misguided young educated men were eager to go against the tradition which forbade women to have sex relations before marriage, but they would leave the latter to face the consequences on their own. As a result, women had to exercise a great deal of stubbornness and independence from their fiancés if they were to maintain their dignity and social standing within their communities. This is the basis of Grace Ogot's 'The White Veil' which has been dramatized into a play of the same title by Florentine Orwa.<sup>5</sup>

The White Veil examines the conflict between respect for a firm tradition and conversion into shallow modernism. Dolly strongly believes in the tradition which regards virginity as a symbol of a woman's honour. Contrasted with Dolly's attitude is her fiancé Curtis's inclination towards the fashion which regards anything traditional as outmoded.

Dolly is presented as a principled character where Curtis comes through as a character who is easily swayed by friends. It is not out of conviction that the young man wants to sleep with Dolly but, as he admits, he is influenced by his friend who tells him that refraining from pre-marital sex is old-fashioned. Curtis therefore wants to sleep with his fiancée merely to join the current fashion.

Although she is Western-educated like Curtis, Dolly has been



brought up on strict traditional lines where virginity of a woman is regarded as an honour to her husband as well as her parents. Notice Dolly's stubbornness as she rejects her fiancé's suggestion:

Tradition strongly states that a girl MUST be a virgin on the day of her marriage. This is the greatest honour she can bestow upon her future husband and her parents. Recently my sister Apiyo brought great rejoicing in our family when a blood-stained bed-sheet was brought back wrapped in a goat-skin.<sup>6</sup>

The intention of Ogot and Orwa in creating such a strong female character is not to show their support of tradition per se but to demonstrate women's strength in coping with changing circumstances. What is admirable about Dolly here is not her support of tradition but her ~~resolution~~ to follow her own convictions and make her own independent choice. As women writers, Grace Ogot and Florentine Orwa are able to create a convincing strong female character, a task which is sometimes difficult for male writers. A similar type of character is seen in Birungi in Elvania Zirimu's The Family Spear.<sup>7</sup>

Elvania Zirimu's play, The Family Spear, does not examine women's plight in connection with the issue of chastity. However it is appropriate in this section since the traditional custom which forms its basis has some connection with a woman's sexual commitment in changing cultural circumstances.

The Family Spear is based on the traditional custom which requires a bride to sleep with her father-in-law as a test of her suitability as a sexual mate for the bridegroom. The father-in-law performs an erotic ritual used to determine a woman's sexual worth and it is within his

jurisdiction to reject the bride if she does not satisfy the requirements of the test. Notice the implication that a woman is a sexual commodity from the overtones of the ritual. This is a ritual which is common among the Baziba of Tanzania as well as the Banyankore and the Bakiga of Uganda.

Birungi is torn between her appreciation of modernity and the need to satisfy communal expectations and gain acceptance as a worthy bride. Initially, she wants to go against tradition like many of her contemporaries but after considering her husband's and her in-laws' wishes, she decides to compromise and have a traditional wedding. But this does not satisfy her husband. Although it is in fact Muweesi who insists on a traditional wedding, he is not prepared to give all that tradition demands; he is not willing to have his father sleep with his wife. However, Muweesi is not strong enough to state what his true wishes are, he appears ambivalent. Birungi, on the other hand, is very clear about her wishes; once she agrees to have a traditional wedding she decides to go through it all the way. She therefore cannot understand why her husband should be angry with her. She tells him:

I thought you brought me here because you were anxious for me to accept you in your own home. You wanted to please your parents and you wanted me to please them ... We quarrelled because ... I did not want your parents around and watching me during our first days together, before we had a little time to ourselves. But I agreed to go your way.<sup>8</sup>

When Birungi sleeps with her father-in-law as custom demands, father and son come into loggerheads with one another instead of appreciating each other in the context of a firmly established custom.



The conflict between Muweesi and Seekisa over Birungi indicates Zirimu's scepticism about the custom in question. Instead of cementing human relations, it is a custom which creates barriers between those concerned. For Birungi, her attempt to come to terms with tradition becomes a dividing factor, not only between her and her husband, but also between the latter and his father.

But, like Ogot and Orwa in The White Veil, Zirimu is not interested in tradition per se. Her sympathies for women who are caught in the conflict between tradition and modernity are implicit from her scepticism about this tradition. More so, her sympathies are indicated by her treatment of Muweesi as a representative of those educated men who cannot make up their minds as to which side they belong in the battle between cultures and end up sacrificing their wives as a result.

Birungi's portrayal as a strong-minded woman is not accidental. Her decision to satisfy tradition and sleep with her father-in-law may strike a modern audience as a sign of weakness. But what is important for the playwright is that her heroine makes her own independent decision. After sleeping with her father-in-law, she tells Muweesi that she did it of her own accord. This is connected to a remark she makes earlier in the play about how she carries out her actions: 'What I do I have to do from within, otherwise there's no point'.<sup>9</sup>

Hence it would appear that in The White Veil and The Family Spear the women writers are recording their admiration of the birth of new women in the wake of cultural change; women who, unlike their mothers

who survived by submissiveness, make their own independent decisions and are even prepared to challenge the men at the point of cultural conflict.

### Women and Initiation

Austin Bukenya (M) Uganda: The Bride 1984

B.M. Kenyago (F) )  
Ngugi wa Thiong'o (M)) Kenya: The Trial 1968; 1982

Rebeka Njau (F) Kenya: The Scar 1965

Among African communities which practise initiation of girls at adolescence, it is paramount for every young woman to undergo this rite as a prerequisite to her acceptance by her peer group, but more important, as a condition for her readiness for marriage. A young woman who, for any reason, has not gone through this ceremony cannot be accepted as an adult or as a full member of the cultural community in which she lives. It is considered taboo for any initiated men and women to have sexual relations with the uninitiated.

Initiation of women is a major issue in the East African drama based on the traditional setting. Some playwrights examine problems arising from the inevitability of interaction between those communities which practise initiation of women and those who do not. Other playwrights examine the conflicts which arose in the area of initiation of women during the cultural contact between Africa and the West.

In The Bride<sup>10</sup> Austin Bukenya examines the way in which rigid

conservatism connected with the initiation of women affects human relations on individual as well as communal levels.

Namvua is ostracised by her peers, not just because Merio her father is a foreigner in the plains, but because she is not initiated. In spite of her having lived in very close relationship with her peers Namvua's recently initiated peers adamantly reject her and refuse to listen to any argument that she is rightly a member of their age group:

Mtuta: And which knife did that foreign girl  
of yours face? A peeling knife?

(Girls yell out approval and encouragement)

Lekindo: Mtuta!

Mtuta: I will say it again:  
in whose courtyard was Namvua circumcised?  
On what day? In what season?

Kuye: Yes. Let her open her legs to us if Mtuta lies.

Kitavi: Is that where all your sense lies, Kuye? ...

Kajiru: But we faced the ordeal.  
We should drink the brew of our courage  
and expect some respect from those  
who have not been reborn.

However, it is not Namvua's fault that she has not been initiated. It is the fault of the rigid conservatism of the culture of the plains in which she lives. In order for a girl to be initiated in this culture, it is necessary for the elders to invoke the spirits of her ancestors. Since Namvua's father is a foreigner his ancestors cannot be accepted in the spirit world of the people of the plains and therefore at initiation the elders claim that they cannot include her as they do not know which spirits to invoke on her behalf. Notice that if this culture were more flexible and more concerned about the welfare



of the individual there is no reason why the elders could not invoke Namvua's maternal ancestors' spirits since her mother is a daughter of the plains. But this being a patriarchal society, there is negligible recognition of women's importance and moreover, when there is conflict between the interests of the individual and those of the community, the latter takes priority. Notice, however, from the priest's attitude towards Namvua, how easy it is to twist culture and sacrifice the individual when there is something to be gained on the communal level.

Lerema, Wanga's priest, takes advantage of the initiates' disturbance over Namvua and proposes to her father that the girl becomes the handmaid of Wanga, the god of the plains, through marrying the priest's dead son. He tells Merio:

That she-goat of yours could -  
 well, become a handmaid of Wanga ...  
 And you, Merio, will become one of Wanga's:  
 though a foreigner, you'll be a father of the shrine.  
 But, above all, you may save these distracted plains  
 by removing your she-goat from among the new initiates.<sup>12</sup>

Being uninitiated, Namvua should be the last woman to be chosen as a handmaid of Wanga; but because the priest knows that no parent of the plains will give their daughter's hand in marriage to a dead man, he now twists the situation and takes Namvua as a worthy sacrifice. It is important to note the way in which Namvua's opinion on the matter or happiness as an individual are disregarded. She is a mere woman and therefore her consent in this arrangement is not considered necessary.

Through Lekindo, the chief's son who loves Namvua, the playwright argues that rigid conservatism can only build a decadent culture and



that a valid culture is the one which recognizes the interests and the intrinsic qualities of the individual. Lekindo challenges his father's conservatism by calling him to defend the elders' position that Namvua is unworthy as a woman just because she is an uninitiated foreigner. Much to Shundu's disgust, Lekindo challenges him to examine Namvua and defend his position that this girl is less of a woman or a human being than other girls just because she is an uncircumcised foreigner:

Look at this girl. Look at her black hair,  
 look at her two eyes, her one nose;  
 look at her two lips, her one chin;  
 look at her two hands and her two breasts ...  
 What is it she hasn't got you non-foreigners have?  
 How many ancestors do you want to come and tell you  
 that Namvua is a woman, a human being, like any other?<sup>13</sup>

Namvua's subsequent marriage to Lekindo is symbolic. As the next Leader of the Elders' Council and now the adopted son of Wanga's priest, Lekindo becomes the potential keeper of the plains' culture. His marriage to a foreign uncircumcised girl therefore, is a step that ushers in a new era of flexibility in cultural matters and greater recognition of the individual's intrinsic worth. Namvua therefore becomes a handmaid of Wanga in a more promising light as far as cultural development is concerned. She is not a handmaid of Wanga in the elders' decadent and conservative culture but in a culture which is prepared to accept changes to cater for individual differences and needs.

Although in The Bride Bukenya is sympathetic towards women in traditional conflicts, it must be noted, however, that the play is too

male-oriented. Namvua is not only the heroine of the play but she is also the character around whom the major conflicts in the play revolve. It is disappointing, therefore, that she is not allowed to play a more active role in weaving her own fate. Since this is a patriarchal society, it is understandable that it is the male elders who almost lead her to her doom by planning to marry her off to the dead Letie. Nevertheless it is not clear why her salvation should depend exclusively on Lekindo without her playing a more active role in it. It is as though the playwright sees women as completely impotent without men and as though their contribution to social change is only possible through dependence on men.

There is a sharp contrast between Namvua's portrayal and that of Muthoni in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and B.M. Kenyago's The Trial.<sup>14</sup> Where Namvua is resigned to fate and is ready to marry a dead man and be wasted against her will, Muthoni is rebellious and determined to follow her convictions at all costs.

Muthoni is caught between her belief in initiation as a cultural aspect that is vital to her roots as a socially integrated individual and her father Joshua's uncompromising Christianity. Muthoni's father is the most fanatic of the new converts to Christianity. He has swallowed whole the missionaries' teaching that initiation is unchristian and that it must be uprooted. Joshua is not just a fanatical Christian, he is the most renowned church leader. In rebelling against her father, therefore, Muthoni emerges as a woman of tremendous determination, courage and strong convictions. Notice this aspect of

her character from her approach to the issue of initiation as she defends her decision:

Muthoni: Look, please, I ... I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman knowing the ways of the hills and the ridges.

Nyambura: But father, remember him.

Muthoni: Why, are we fools?

(Shakes Nyambura by the shoulders)

Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? I, too, am a Christian. But that is not enough. My life and your life are here in the hills, in the hills that you and I know.<sup>15</sup>

Muthoni takes the initiative and runs away to her aunt who still respects the initiation rite. The young girl is not dissuaded from her set purpose by either the community's gossip or her father's threat to disown her. Eventually Muthoni dies from her circumcision wound, but even at her dying moment she is still convinced that her decision to be initiated was right. Though dying, she sees herself as having accomplished her mission of synthesizing tradition with Christianity. 'As she died, she said that she was now a Christian in the tribe. She even said she saw Jesus'.<sup>16</sup> Muthoni senses a kind of liberating effect from this new approach to culture where she mixes the old and the new.

Unlike Muthoni, Mariana in Rebeka Njau's The Scar<sup>17</sup> sees tradition as an imprisoning element and is determined to help young women rebel against it. Mariana is western-educated and has come to see tradition as having been used to relegate women to inferior



positions and to make them beasts of burden for men. Her mission is to help girls liberate themselves from the type of life that has imprisoned their fore-mothers for years:

First Woman: What does an unmarried woman like you know to teach others?

Second Woman: You have taught our girls to talk and laugh and argue with Men! Do you want them to remain unmarried like you?

Mariana: I want them to free themselves from slavery;  
I want them to respect their bodies and minds  
I want them to break away the shackles that have so  
Long bound them.<sup>18</sup>

One of Mariana's strategies in saving girls from what she sees as the yoke of tradition is to prevent them from going through the rite of initiation. But unlike Muthoni who has a specific conviction on the issue of initiation, Mariana has none. She does not seem to have an idea as to why she considers initiation as one of those traditions which are used to place women in a subservient position. Her words on the issue leave a question unanswered. She says:

A 'physical operation' is as empty as a cave;  
It is meaningless.<sup>19</sup>

If what Mariana means here is that the initiation operation has nothing to contribute towards a girl's personality development, would it then not imply that those who want to have the operation can still have it and it would still not hamper their openness to her new teaching against subservience? It is no wonder then the women in the village see Mariana as an enemy rather than a person who is genuinely trying to help them liberate themselves.

As the play progresses, Mariana's objectives become more and more obscure. We come to learn, for example, that in her youth she was seduced by Pastor and gave birth to an illegitimate child. In a traditional setting, having an illegitimate baby is taken as shameful and it is interpreted as a sure sign of a woman's promiscuity. In view of this background and the swiftness<sup>with</sup> which Mariana gives up her mission once this past is revealed, it is not clear whether her work among the women of Kanyariri village is a result of her conviction that it is important to liberate women from imprisoning aspects of tradition or whether she has some ulterior motive.

The denouement<sup>e</sup> of The Scar leaves the audience with the impression that Mariana has been working merely out of a desire to lose herself in a life that will help her escape from a shameful past. The play is very weak ideologically. This is surprising considering that Rebeka Njau was one of the early women educators in Kenya who were very much concerned with women's position in society. This weakness can be attributed to two factors. There is an artistic weakness whereby the playwright uses too much biographical data without shaping it into the concerns of the play. But the major fault lies in the playwright's lack of political maturity which is crucial in creating literature aimed at influencing social change.

#### Women, Marriage and Bride Price

Bertha Msora (F) Zimbabwe: I Will Wait 1984

Guillaume Oyono-Mbia (M) Cameroon:

Three Suitors One Husband 1968

Notre fille ne se mariera pas 1969

In traditional Africa, a woman's major role is that of wife and mother. Daughters are therefore brought up with the objective of grooming them for marriage and motherhood. A young woman who delays her marriage is not tolerated either by her immediate family or by the community at large. This is the explanation of the prevalence of the oral narrative which relates the tragic consequences faced by a girl who delays her marriage waiting to find a suitor with specific qualities. In order to ensure that women did not rebel against getting married, many traditional communities did not allow their girls to choose when or ~~whom~~ to marry. This is an issue that playwrights view as causing serious conflicts between those women who have some amount of individuality and the traditional community in which they live, particularly during the transition from tradition to modern cultures. In I Will Wait<sup>20</sup>, Bertha Msora discusses the problem faced by a young modern woman who wants to marry out of love while her parents want her to marry out of traditional considerations. Rudo's marriage hopes are on her boyfriend Leo, but little does she know her parents' intentions for her. Her parents want her to marry her late sister's husband because of two traditional reasons. Prior to her death, Tambudzayi requests that her husband should marry Rudo so that the latter can look after their two children. Rudo's parents cannot go against this request owing to the widespread traditional belief that one who goes against the wishes of the dead meets disastrous ends. Secondly by the



time Rudo is old enough to understand this arrangement, her parents have accepted a great deal of material wealth from her brother-in-law Togara and therefore they view her as already having become the latter's property. This kind of attitude illustrates how in traditional Africa, women were valued for their services rather than for their value as human beings.

The experiences Msora chooses as a base for her play are experiences which have a great deal of potential for examining the struggles of a woman caught in the turmoil of conflicts between tradition and modernism. The playwright, however, does not develop either the play or her heroine creatively enough for us to see the conflict in a manner that calls for our sympathies for Rudo. The pace of the play is too fast to allow gradual and dramatic development of ideas which would maintain our interest in the problems examined. For example Rudo is married to Togara before we get a chance to see her feelings towards her predicament.

The major problem with I Will Wait is in the portrayal of Rudo. Rudo is manipulated a great deal by her author and her feelings are not developed. This prevents her from emerging as a character with flesh and blood whom the audience can appreciate fully as a victim of the conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Msora's handling of her play is discussed because it is a factor which hinders a useful comparison. Msora and Oyono-Mbia use cultural conflict as a basis for their plays. It would have been interesting here to compare the attitude of a male playwright and that of a female playwright on

the social problems involved. As will be seen below, being more experienced in playwriting than Msora, Oyono-Mbia, though male, tackles the problems in a way which makes him appear more sensitive to the plight of women than the female playwright.

In the second part of this section, we now focus on the plight of women in connection with the tradition of Bride Price. According to theories on African traditions, the material given to a man by his future son-in-law when the latter marries his daughter is a gift and not payment. Sonia Bleeker attempts to make this distinction with reference to the marriage traditions of the Masai of Kenya:

According to custom the parents of a marriageable girl receive a gift of four head of cattle from her future husband to make up for the loss of a daughter. One of these must be a milch cow with a calf. This gift the people call bride wealth. It is more correct to use the term bride wealth than bride price, since a girl is not bought by her husband ...

If the father-in-law asks for more bullocks, the groom will bring them to him. But this is understood to be a loan. The father-in-law will eventually pay it back. However, it establishes cordial relationship between son-in-law and father-in-law.<sup>21</sup>

Bleeker's informants must have been at pains to tone down the commercial aspects of bride price. The difference, however, is not established and the attitude towards women as property owned by men lurks in the above quotation. There is no reason why, for example, the bullocks given as a 'loan' should play a greater role in cementing the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law more than the mere fact of the marital union of the daughter and the son-in-law. Notice the way in which the feelings and the future happiness of the



bride are disregarded in these marriage negotiations. It is significant to note also that the mother is excluded completely from these transactions.

Guillaume Oyono-Mbia bases his plays on the period of transition between traditionalism and Western modernism and examines the plight of the western-educated woman in a society which still believes that a daughter is a commercial property of her father rather than a free individual. Although he uses the comic mode, Oyono-Mbia is very direct in conveying serious messages in his drama as he has a way of blending comedy with serious moments when the audience is forced to engage in serious involvement in the predicaments of his characters.

In Three Suitors One Husband<sup>22</sup> Oyono-Mbia is very direct in his criticism about the way in which women are denied the freedom to choose their husbands because the parents' major interest is how much dowry they can get in exchange for their daughters. In an interview with Cosmo Pieterse, Oyono-Mbia explains that the play was inspired by an actual situation involving a close female relative who was forced by her parents to marry a man she had never seen before:

The story stems from something that happened to one of my cousins, who got married in exactly the same way as described in Three Suitors One Husband. I just happened to attend a palava where they decided all this and I was interested in the fact that nobody had consulted her at all. When she came back, everyone was sighing and saying; 'well! here's your husband!' Of course she protested but in this case she had to marry the fellow. I tried to argue with my relatives saying my cousin ought to have been consulted and they were really amazed at the thought that a woman should be consulted about her marriage. After all they were only doing it for her own good. So my first play started as a taking down of all that was said during the palava.<sup>23</sup>



Although Three Suitors One Husband is based on an actual situation, it is of course not just a mere account of this ~~occurrence~~. Oyono-Mbia is using drama to discuss the conflicts which arise when two different cultures meet and how these conflicts affect the individuals concerned. On the one side of this conflict are Juliette's parents and the community at large. The community and Juliette's parents view a daughter in the African traditional sense whereby she is owned by her parents and therefore when she gets married the important thing should be how much wealth she brings to the family in the form of <sup>a</sup> dowry. On the other side of the conflict is Juliette herself whose western education has exposed her to a different outlook, she wants to marry for love and she wants to have her independence on the choice of her spouse.

From the beginning of the play, Oyono-Mbia is critical of traditional attitudes towards women as commodities for sale rather than human beings who have particular feelings and needs. Juliette is said to have been sent to school as a kind of future investment for her family. It is this point which her father Atangana emphasizes when he says:

Er ... I must admit, Juliette is the right daughter for a wise man like me! When I sent her to secondary school, I was saying to everybody: 'Some day, I'll benefit from that!' <sup>24</sup>

Now that Juliette has completed her secondary school education, therefore, her family is very eager to get her married off in order to reap the benefits they have been expecting.

The playwright creates a somewhat farcical but plausible

situation whereby Juliette's family accepts <sup>a</sup> dowry from the first suitor who comes along, and a little later they accept yet another offer from a suitor who is likely to give a higher dowry. All this is done without any consultation with Juliette; she only comes to learn about it when she arrives from secondary school.

Oyono-Mbia criticizes the way in which traditionally a daughter is regarded not only as the property of her parents but as the property of the entire extended family as well as the community at large. Atangana is not the only person who has vested interests in his daughter's marriage. Juliette's brother Oyono would like a share of her dowry in order to pay for his own bride. Even drunken Uncle Ondua has his own vested interests; he would like Juliette to marry the civil servant in order for him to be assured of protection against police harassment for his drunkenness and his wife's business of illicit liquor! The playwright satirizes the way in which a girl becomes the property of the entire community in a scene where every man in Juliette's village is seen scrambling for drinks in a bid to reap fruits from her expected marriage with the civil servant.

Juliette's future happiness is not considered by any of the characters organising her marriage. (It is obvious, anyway, that she is not likely to be happy if she marries the civil servant as he is old enough to be her father and has many other wives already!) There is a clash between the value system from which Juliette's family is operating and that from which she herself is operating. The best suitor for Juliette from her own point of view and from her aspirations

on marriage is the man she loves while from her family's point of view the best contender is the one who can pay the highest dowry. Notice this clash in the excerpt below:

Juliette: (stubbornly) I love someone else!

Matalina: (incredulously) How could you do that, Juliette? A mere schoolboy! Will he ever buy you expensive dresses? If at least he was studying at the National School of Administration!

Atangana: (who thinks there has been quite enough nonsense already) You say that young man hasn't got any money?

Juliette: Not a franc!

Atangana: (with triumphant sneer) Then you'll marry Mbia! (clapping his hands) And that's final!!

(He goes towards the kitchen.)

Juliette: (bursts into tears) I don't love him!

Atangana: (from the doorstep) You'll love him! How insolent! You're going to make me miss a medal!

(He goes in.)

Makrita: (comfortingly) Don't annoy your father Juliette! Do as he says! You're going to make him miss a medal!

Juliette: (still sobbing) You don't even listen to me! You don't love me! Nobody loves me here!

Abessolo: (who was moving to the kitchen) Shut up, you stupid thing! Why do you think we're demanding such a high bride price for you? Doesn't that show how dearly we love you? You're the one who doesn't love us! You don't love your brother ...

Oyono: Yes! You don't want me to get married!<sup>25</sup>

Neither side can understand the other. The two sides are clearly speaking at cross-purposes, especially in connection with love.



Juliette sees love in terms of feelings whereas her family, blinded by their vested interests, cannot see love in isolation from material gains. It is grandfather Abessolo, particularly, who reveals this attitude most clearly when he implies that the family's love for Juliette is demonstrated by their demand of an exorbitant bride price for her.

Juliette evaluates herself as a human being and demands that her family treat her as a human rather than a commercial object. This is why she refuses to be 'sold' to any of the suitors mobilized by her family. 'I am a free person'<sup>26</sup>, she proclaims.

In Notre fille ne se mariera pas<sup>27</sup> Oyono-Mbia develops further the conflict between traditional attitudes and western attitudes towards daughters. This is at a time when higher western education for girls is a new thing in Africa and parents have not yet reconciled traditional attitudes with the new ways of life. Charlotte's parents regard her as a commodity for sale; the introduction of an education where they have had to pay a great deal of money for her naturally increases their expectations of benefits from her. They therefore make great financial demands on her when she completes her education and gets a salaried job.

The exaggerated amount of material expected from Charlotte implies that she is being evaluated as a more expensive commodity than the uneducated girls. The material she is expected to bring in is impossible. Her father expects her to build him a stone house and to pay<sup>a</sup> dowry for his latest bride. He also expects her to educate all

her brothers, sisters and cousins. Besides these family responsibilities, Charlotte is used as a scapegoat for her brothers' and sisters' lack of education; some of her mother's co-wives claim that it is because of the amount of money they had to contribute towards Charlotte's education that their own children are not educated.

It is with regard to their vested interests that Charlotte's family insist that she should not get married in case she breaks away from them and does not meet all their material expectations. This is a contradiction of traditional values. A woman's major role in the traditional context is that of wife and mother. Therefore by insisting that Charlotte should not get married her people are denying her the chance to fulfil herself by the standards set by these very people. It is ironical, for example, that Charlotte's father expects his daughter not to marry so that, among other things, she can pay dowry for his latest bride while he already has seven other wives whom he is too old to manage!

One of the strengths of Notre fille ne se mariera pas is the way in which Oyono-Mbia presents the issues he examines in the context of a conflict between two different cultures rather than as clashes between individuals. The playwright achieves this by using as his mouthpiece an educated man who appreciates both cultures. Atangana explains to his wife whose parents are too westernized:

Tes parents t'ont peut-être envoyée étudier en France à grands frais pour t'assurer le bel avenir dont tu nous parles. Les parents de Charlotte, eux, s'attendent tout bonnement à ce que leur fille leur rembourse tout l'argent dépensé pour ses études.<sup>28</sup>

This is the core of the problem: in the western culture daughters are brought up to prepare them for a good future; they are brought up for their own sake. In the African traditional culture on the other hand, daughters are brought up as investments for the parents.

Although Oyono-Mbia is sympathetic towards women in relation to the issue of bride price, he shows a weakness as a male writer in this play. Unlike Juliette in Three Suitors One Husband, Charlotte is presented as too docile to be true. She contributes very much to her treatment as a commodity by not putting up any resistance. Even when she decides to marry without informing her parents she uses a trick which would not help change their attitudes towards her or the attitudes towards daughters in general.

#### Women, Marriage and Polygamy

James Ng'ombe (M) Malawi: The Banana Tree 1976

Chacha Nyaigoti Chacha (M) Kenya:  
Mke Mwenza (My co-wife) 1982

Guillaume Oyono-Mbia (M) Cameroon:  
Notre fille ne se mariera pas 1969

Closely related to the issue of payment of bride price and as widespread among many ethnic groups of Africa is the custom of polygamy. This practice has been traced as having originated from economic roots and from the whole question of the commercialization of women. Although scholars of African cultures are often defensive and as such attempt to avoid stating explicitly that the system depends on the



attitude whereby women are viewed as economic objects, one of the fundamental bases of polygamy is economic prestige for the men. From her study among the Kiga (Chiga) of western Uganda, May Edel makes the following observation:

Having many wives usually means having, or having had, the cattle necessary for the bride-price. However, this does not mean that wives are counted as property; I never heard such an equation explicitly made.<sup>29</sup>

It is implied here that among the Kiga, women are used as commercial objects to prove a man's economic standing in his community.

A related point which emerges from Bleeker's research among the Masai of Kenya is that polygamy enables men to use women as cheap labour besides using them as economic assets. Bleeker observes:

A Masai usually has three, four or five wives, if he is the owner of a large herd of cattle. Several wives are needed to help tend the herd and to milk the cows. A man does not milk his cows. It is a woman's work.<sup>30</sup>

In a more recent study among the Akamba of Kenya, Ndeti concludes that polygamy is beneficial to society by helping communities cope with a situation where women outnumber men. He says:

Recent studies indicate that more males are born in any population but the infant mortality is higher among the males so that in adulthood there is a greater number of females. Studies have also shown that women live longer than men. Thus, polygamy would be an adaptive principle which eliminates natural waste and unnecessary sex tensions in the society.<sup>31</sup>

Although these sociological observations are relevant as background material they are limited in that they exclude an assessment of the effect of polygamous relationships on the parties involved.

Ndeti's suggestion that polygamy prevents women from suffering sexual

frustration would need supportive data to make it credible. The exact opposite of Ndeti's observation may be the real situation. One of the most recurrent sentiments which come through from the drama based on polygamy is that women are bitterly frustrated by the fact of having to share a sexual mate. Such an observation obviously arises from one of the fundamental factors which distinguish creative literature from social sciences; the aspect of sensitivity of creative writers to the human condition which in turn is reflected by the sensitivity of the characters who populate these creative works.

James Ng'ombe's The Banana Tree<sup>32</sup> is a work of creative literature that is appropriate for explaining the origins of polygamy in traditional Africa as it is based on oral literature. The traditional man/woman used oral literature to inculcate values and norms in the members of his/her society and it is in recognition of this that some African writers have based their creative works on oral narratives. The Banana Tree is a dramatization of the Malawian myth of Mkundikana and Mangepo which explains how death came into the world, but in his play the author has highlighted the male attitudes behind the establishment of polygamy.

The man, Mwambi, is introduced as the first creation of Mlengi (God). Two women are created later and given to Mwambi. The role of these women as servants of the man is spelt out clearly in what Mwambi recalls as having been said to him by Mlengi when the latter gave them to him:

I remember well the words you spoke when you gave them to me.



You said: "They will make you happy. When you need water, Mangepo will be there with her pot always filled for your use. In a pot she will prepare your food and from other pots she will pour water for warm baths". All this you said about Mangepo. (Pause) And then you said: "When harvest time comes Mkundikana will be there to carry the fruits in a basket balanced on her head. On long journeys she will carry the loads in beautiful baskets, for I have made basket-weaving her craft just as I have made Mangepo a potter". All this you said to me and I do not have the mouth with which to recount the joy which I felt on that day.<sup>33</sup>

The myth of Mkundikana and Mangepo from which The Banana Tree originates is a religious myth. One can therefore observe that the traditional African man used religion to rationalize the practice of polygamy. From the above quotation, it is a practice ordered by God. Notice the way in which polygamy is rationalized only in view of what men profit from it and ignoring the effect it has on the women.

From the above quotation and from the ensuing drama in this play, women are presented as proficient in traditional art (represented by pottery and basket making). But there is no credit given to them for this artistic prowess. It is not an art in which they engage for their personal gratification or in the service of society in general. Their involvement in art is part of their slavery to the man. Indeed the kind of relationship between the man and each of the wives is a master-servant kind of relationship. Notice this from a scene where Mwambi is trying to settle a dispute between the two wives:

(Mwambi enters, and speaks with authority.)

Mwambi: Mkundikana! (Mkundikana timidly enters, adjusting her chirundu, she kneels at his left. She faces him respectfully.) Mangepo! (No answer.) Mangepo, don't you hear me? Mangepo!



Mangepo: (Approaching in an angry silence. She answers from just behind him.) Wee-Ngozo.

Mwambi: (facing Mangepo) Stop treating me like your equal. From now on, know this: You can shout at Mkundikana, but you can't shout at me. (Mangepo kneels at Mwambi's left.) What's wrong with you women? Do I have to shout every time I want some peace? When Mlengi gave you to me he meant to make life more bearable for me. But instead you two are always making trouble. I am tired of arguments, squabbles, quarrels and complaints and I have decided to bring some peace into this compound.

Mangepo: (timidly) But Mwambi, my lord, please forgive me.<sup>34</sup>

The image of the man which is reflected in the above excerpt and in the whole play is that of a superior being, serious and bearing qualities of leadership. In contrast to the man, the women are presented as petty, jealous and vicious. In the quarrel concluded by the above excerpt the women hurl insults at one another and they are ready to tear each other to pieces. It is Mwambi's intervention that saves the situation, but only for a time. Later in the play, Mkundikana's jealousy leads her to cut up the beautiful banana tree that embodies Mangepo, thus bringing about death and destroying all hope of reincarnation for Mangepo or any other human being who dies hereafter.

The tragedy in the play arises from the women's frustrations experienced from polygamous conditions. The extreme anger and aggression of the women against one another is motivated by the problem of having to share one man between them. Notice the way in which the man is completely oblivious of this fact since he relates to them

according to what he can get from them, without considering what they themselves get from the relationship. Consider, for example:

What's wrong with you women? Do I have to shout every time I want some peace? When Mlengi gave you to me he meant to make life more bearable for me. But instead you two are always making trouble. I am tired of arguments, squabbles, quarrels and complaints ...<sup>35</sup>

One problem we find in James Ng'ombe's The Banana Tree is that one cannot detect the playwright's attitude towards the predicament of his female characters. Ng'ombe has reworked the myth of Mkundikana and Mangepo to shape it into drama, but perhaps he has not seen the necessity to take a stand on the problems the play raises. The question of taking a stand is similarly a major problem with Chacha Nyaigoti Chacha's play Mke Mwenza<sup>36</sup> (My co-wife).

Like Ng'ombe's The Banana Tree, Chacha's Mke Mwenza raises the point that polygamous marriages do not ~~consist~~ of relationships in which the happiness of all involved is considered, only the man's needs and desires are satisfied without giving any regard as to how these arrangements affect women.

One of the reasons why Chahe wants to marry a second wife is that he wants to try a woman who will bear him a son. Notice the discriminating attitude towards female children and also the way in which women are blamed when there are no male children in a marriage. Chahe even dares to tell his wife right ~~to~~ her face that she has failed to bear him a son:

Chahe: (Anamjongelea mkewe) Tulia mke wangu ... hayo yote nayafahamu, bali ni miaka mingi iliyopita na mpaka sasa hatujapata mtoto wa kiume; vile vile



sioni kama kuna tamaa ya kufanikiwa huko mbeleni.  
Niruhusu Boke nijaribu karata nyingine.

Boke: (Kicheko cha uchungu) Unasemaje? Ati karata nyingine! Maanake mie nimekuwa karata mbovu sasa, sio? Tangu hapo umeishadhamiria kuoa mke mwengine kumbe ... wala huoni haya kuja nilaghai mie wazi wazi? ... Karata mpya! ...

Chahe: (Akimkabili Boke kwa hasira na macho makavu) Utamaduni wetu hauwezi kamwe kuwa wa kipumbavu. Nimejaribu kukupa haki yako na kama hutaki kuafikiana nami nitatumia madaraka yangu nikiwa mkuu wa nyumba hii. Nimeshawaambia wazazi wangu mambo haya, nao wamenishauri nioe mke wa pili. Si kwa sababu hiyo tu, ati umeshindwa kunizalia mvulana, bali pia kama ujuavyo kura ni mwaka ujao.<sup>37</sup>

(Chahe: (He moves near his wife) Be calm my wife ... all that I understand, many years have passed and we haven't yet got a son; and I don't think we have any hope of being blessed with a son later. Allow me Boke to try another card.

Boke: (Laughs bitterly) What are you saying? Did you say another card? Oh! so I have become a very bad card? And now you have decided to marry another wife ... And you don't even feel ashamed saying this to me openly? ... Another card ...

Chahe: (Looking at Boke angrily) Our traditions cannot be nonsensical. I have tried to give you your rights and if you don't want to co-operate with me I shall use my traditional rights as the head of this house. I have already informed my parents about this problem and they have told me to marry another wife. It is not only because you have failed to bear me a son, as you know (parliamentary) elections will take place next year.)<sup>38</sup>

The man's reference to Boke and his intended wife as 'cards' shows his attitude towards women as commodities. This attitude towards wives as commodities is illustrated further by the role Chahe intends his second wife to play. As he explains to his friend later, Chahe wants to marry a woman who comes from the constituency in which



he hopes to stand for parliamentary elections. Traditionally, a home or family is symbolic of one's roots; building a home in the form of a family in an area is considered a reflection of a man's attachment to the given area. In marrying a woman from this constituency, therefore, Chahe wants to use her as a stepping stone between him and the electorate and as a way of putting on an air of commitment to the latter. This attitude towards women as objects in men's political ambitions is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Although Mke Mwenza does not develop in a convincing manner, the point is made about the way in which the selfish attitudes of men in polygamous situations lead women to desperation. Following Chahe's marriage to a younger woman, Boke starts a love affair with a younger man and eventually murders her husband in a bid to inherit his money.

The disappointing thing about Mke Mwenza is that in the latter part of the drama the playwright takes the position of a prosecutor towards his heroine. Boke is shown to assume the character of an evil woman who has extra-marital relations for the fun of it and who murders her husband out of greed for money. In a play where the author is sensitive to the plight of women the heroine would develop in such a way that her moral disintegration is seen as a direct result of desperation from a frustrating relationship. This would persuade the audience to sympathise though not necessarily condoning the actions of the character. For example, Eulalie in Ama Ata Aidoo's Dilemma of a Ghost<sup>39</sup> goes through a period of desperation and hopelessness where she appears anti-social towards those who come into contact with her.

But owing to the playwright's sensitivity towards her, rather than condemn her, the audience are persuaded to see her as a victim of traditions which are unfair towards women.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike Ng'ombe and Chacha, Guillaume Oyono-Mbia criticizes polygamy in a direct and unambiguous manner. In Notre fille ne se mariera pas<sup>41</sup> which has already been discussed in relation to the issue of bride price, Oyono-Mbia satirizes the way in which wives of polygamous marriages are regarded as non-entities as well as mere commodities, and the extent to which their personal needs are disregarded.

The place of women in the village of Mvoutessi is summed up in a proverb used by one of the characters in Notre fille ne se mariera pas in his advice to his male companions on how to relate to women. He says:

Comme disaient nos ancêtres: 'Une femme est semblable à une poule: si tu fais attention aux mille choses qu'elle picore, jamais tu ne voudra en manger le gésier!'<sup>42</sup>

Just as one does not consider everything a chicken pecks when eating its gizzard, one should not take a woman's complaints seriously. The implication is that a woman is not a human being; the only important thing about her as far as a man is concerned is what he can get from her. This is the attitude Chief Mbarga has towards his seven wives.

Mbarga's wives are non-entities. Only his eldest wife Matalina and his latest bride Delphina have some kind of identity; but this is only because they have special roles to play for his personal comfort. Matalina acts as the head of the harem and deputises for Mbarga in the

organisation of the homestead. As Mbarga's nephew, Abesso-Zang, correctly observes, it is only Delphina who acts as a conjugal mate.

In the scene where Mbarga asks his wives to contribute to the provisions he intends to take to his daughter Charlotte in the city, Oyono-Mbia dramatizes the way in which women in polygamous homes are treated as non entities. Notice that Mbarga has to be reminded about the other wives besides Matalina and Delphina:

Abesso-Zang: Où sont toutes les autres femmes?

Mbarga: Est-ce que je sais, mon fils? Quand je te  
dis que personne ne m'écoute dans ce village!  
(Il élève la voix) A a a ah Tsesilia a a a  
ô ô ôh!

Voix de Cécilia: (D'une cuisine lointaine) O ô ô ôh!

Mbarga: (Même jeu) A a a ah Ma'atha

Voix de Martha: (Impatiente, d'une cuisine lointaine)  
Eé é é hié! J'entends!

Mbarga: (Même jeu) As a ah Yôloyana a a a ô ô ôh!

Voix de Juliana: (D'une autre cuisine lointaine) O ô ô ôh!

Mbarga: (Tonne) Na ya? Vous dormez encore? Vous  
n'entendez pas tous ces gens qui reviennent de  
la prière matinale? Où sont les régimes de  
plantains que vous voulez envoyer à votre  
fille? Quand me les apporterez-vous?<sup>43</sup>

The picture we get from this incident is that of a prison warder calling out the roll of those prisoners under his guard. The names of the wives here may as well have been numbers like those of prisoners! There is no personal relationship between Mbarga and each of the wives. In fact, later in the play, Mbarga admits that to him these women are mere commodities for whom he paid dowry to acquire. Notice this from



his complaints about his second wife:

Quoi? Quelle est cette façon de répondre quand l'homme qui t'a fait venir dans ce village t'appelle? J'ai versé une dot suffisante à tes parents, non?<sup>44</sup>

A criticism against polygamy which one cannot afford to ignore in Notre fille ne se mariera pas is an attack on this practice as being a social institution in which individual needs of each woman are not considered. This is indicated by the constant complaints of Mbarga's wives when they refer to themselves as 'celles qui sont venues ici pour garder le village de Mbarga'. There is implied frustration in this complaint. The playwright examines especially the bitterness of the wife named Martha as an illustration of the social deprivation of a woman in a polygamous marriage.

Martha is a very frustrated wife. Her frustrations can be detected from the outspoken manner in which she expresses her jealousy towards her co-wives and also from her open anger and antagonism towards her husband. Her marital frustrations are best expressed in her long speech quoted below:

Moi je n'ai pas de bouche pour parler dans ce village! Je dirai rien maintenant, mais j'attends le jour où je parlerai à Charlotte face à face! Tous nos enfants n'ont pu aller au collège faute d'argent, parce que tout l'argent qui provenait des cacaoyères de Mbarga devait servir à payer les études de Charlotte chez les soeurs catholiques de Yaoundé! On n'entendait plus parler de rien d'autre dans ce village: "Charlotte a besoin de nouvelles robes: ah Ma'atha, vends quelques régimes de plataniers pour qu'on lui envoie de l'argent! ... Charlotte a froid au pays des blancs: que toutes les femmes de Mbarga aillent chercher les macabos dans leurs huttes et qu'elles les vendent pour qu'on envoie de l'argent à Charlotte!" ... Et si celles qui ne sont venues ici que pour garder le village osaient demander: "Et les autres enfants? Quand les enverra-t-on au collège?" ... Tout le monde se

fâchait et disait: "Taisez-vous! Charlotte nous enrichera tous quand elle reviendra de France! ..."45

We have quoted this speech, not only because it helps us understand the speaker's anger, jealousy and antagonism, but because it helps elucidate the unfairness of the situation of a woman in a polygamous marriage. There is no doubt that Martha is exaggerating about how much she has had to contribute towards educating her co-wife's child, but her basic complaint cannot be ignored. It is not fair to expect a woman to sacrifice the welfare of her own children for that of her co-wives' children. The point being raised here is that it is all very well for a polygamous man to regard his children from all his wives wholesale as children of his homestead; but the wives themselves cannot be expected not to discriminate. On the emotional level, especially under frustrating circumstances, a woman's biological child is her only true child.

Martha's attitude towards Charlotte, in addition, illustrates the way in which women in polygamous marriages are forced to victimize other women as a way of looking for scapegoats against whom to vent their anger. Martha's venom against Charlotte is misdirected anger. She cannot fight her husband directly and therefore she hits at him through his favourite daughter but, of course, this does not help improve her situation.

The experiences of the female characters examined in this section nullify the theory which looks at polygamy as an adaptive system aimed at preventing social tension for women. Women are human beings and

each one has her own personal needs. Polygamy fails to cater for these needs by looking at women en masse and by its very foundation, that is, as an institution aimed at boosting men's economic and social positions.

### Women, Marriage and Procreation

Austin Bukenya (M) Uganda: The Bride 1984

David Mulwa (M) Kenya: Eyes of Judgement 1985

Shimane Mekgoe (M) South Africa:  
Lindiwe 1978

The last section of this chapter examines the representation of women in their role in the procreation process. In traditional Africa, a woman's major role was to marry and produce children. The reproductive role was taken so seriously that it was never allowed to be a private matter between spouses but was the concern of an entire community. Barrenness or failure of a woman to produce children was an unforgivable curse. Among the Fante of Ghana, for example, a woman who died before producing children was given symbolic ritual punishment of having hot pepper thrown into her sex organ during her burial. Up to today, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, a woman who fails to get pregnant three months to a year after marriage is dismissed as useless. Although a woman in this situation may not necessarily be abandoned after the marriage of a second wife, she is nevertheless likely to be forced to leave out of frustrations from conjugal neglect.

The attitude towards women as procreational gadgets in traditional



Africa is best expressed by a male character in one of the plays examined in this study:

Women were made to flower the world with children. A woman who cannot contribute to this might as well have been born into something else.<sup>46</sup>

Many African playwrights view this attitude towards women as causing great unhappiness for those who, for some reason, cannot perform the procreational role to the satisfaction of their communities.

In Eyes of Judgement<sup>47</sup> David Mulwa examines the tragedy of barrenness from a Muslim tradition in a contemporary environment. Hadija's barrenness is traced to an abortion her mother forced her to undergo, because of a family feud between Hadija's boyfriend's family and her own family. This barrenness affects both Hadija and her mother Zaina. Zaina links Hadija's barrenness with her own problem of having had only one child and sees herself as a total failure in society and in the eyes of Allah. She tells Hadija:

Do you know what they say about me? ... That I brought forth just one child - you! And that child brought forth nothing. Truly I must be a fallen woman - the cursed of Allah else my lap would be full with grandchildren ...<sup>48</sup>

The role of daughters in providing grandchildren should not go without comment. In most African traditional cultures, a woman's sense of fulfilment in procreation does not end with her own motherhood; it has to be boosted by her daughter's fertility. Notice a similarity between Zaina's yearning for grandchildren and that of Tatu in Austin Bukenya's The Bride<sup>49</sup>. Tatu's rejection of the plan to have her daughter dedicated to the God Wanga is based on the consequences

of such a plan on her future as a grandmother; it would rob her of the opportunity to fulfil herself as the grandmother of Namvua's children. The fear of being robbed of the chance to have grandchildren is so great that it leads Tatu to blaspheme against Wanga:

My daughter living a perpetual virgin at the shrine  
 married to a heap of cold bones?  
 I am a mother, and the only blessing I  
 ask of the skies  
 is a strong and virile man to marry my daughter  
 and surround me with grandchildren.<sup>50</sup>

Proving one's fertility is so important to African women that even when there is a choice between this responsibility and revering the gods, a woman is prepared to go against the latter. Like Tatu who risks the wrath of the god Wanga, Badua in Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa<sup>51</sup> challenges the gods by refusing <sup>to allow</sup> her daughter to become a priestess. Badua's argument is that if her only daughter becomes a priestess it will rob her of her place in the social hierarchy as the mother of a 'normal' woman and a grandmother. Like Tatu who refuses to be the mother of a childless handmaid of a god, Badua rejects the honour of becoming the mother of a priestess in order to have her reproductive role continued.

The only difference between Tatu and Badua on the one hand, and Zaina of Eyes of Judgement is that the latter is quite westernized where the two other women are completely traditional. Yet even for her the threat of having a childless daughter hangs as an unbearable tragedy. She is ready to help her daughter masquerade as a pregnant woman while she hunts for a baby to steal.

Although Hadija rejects Zaina's suggestions, her anxiety for a baby is no less intense than that of her mother. She tries to make up for her barrenness by losing herself in charity work towards poor mothers in the slums. But her contact with productive women gives her psychological torture. The cries of the slum babies are a constant reminder of her own barrenness. Notice that like her mother, she sees the barrenness in terms of punishment from Allah. She says:

Oh for the pain of childbirth! Just one!  
 But there's nothing here - just a dream  
 that I somehow became a mother. Allah!  
 Why have you forsaken me? I know it was  
 wrong. But it wasn't my fault Allah -  
 please forgive me and make me whole ...<sup>52</sup>

The attitude towards childlessness or barrenness as a form of deformity as reflected in the above speech is very prevalent in Africa. Notice this, for example, from Musa's complaint against his wife in Francis Imbuga's The Fourth Trial.<sup>53</sup> He retorts: 'I think that woman is deformed ... I perform my duties perfectly well, otherwise the children would not be formed ... I must chase that woman away'.<sup>54</sup>

A woman who cannot fulfil her procreational role to the expectation of her community has no place in that community and where a marriage has not been blessed with children the fault is always assumed to be the woman's. Although it is impossible for a community, a family or an individual to admit that a man is sterile or otherwise incapable of fathering children, there are accepted traditional ways of helping out the situation where a husband is known to be sterile. The most commonly accepted tradition is that whereby a woman is turned over to her husband's brother or a close relative for



procreational purposes. Shimane Mekgoe's Lindiwe<sup>55</sup> is based on this tradition.

Lindiwe examines a situation where a man deserts his wife, accusing her of barrenness when he knows very well that he is impotent. Dabula actually admits this to his brother Dumdum:

Dumdum: (Suddenly) By the way, how is Deborah keeping?

Dabula: (Raising his shoulders) I don't know; I left her.

Dumdum: That's desertion.

Dabula: She knows I left her because she was barren.

Dumdum: Barren! ... You are foolish my brother. (Pause)  
Do you not realise that the fault might be with  
you and not your wife?

Dabula: How could I admit to my wife that I was not normal  
sexually?

Dumdum: So you admit it.

Dabula: Yes and I am ashamed. But there was a reason; I  
was a victim of witchcraft.<sup>56</sup>

The way in which Deborah agrees to carry the blame for childlessness when she knows very well that the fault lies with her husband illustrates the way in which sometimes, in traditional Africa, women had to bear social criticism in order to maintain the myth of male superiority and flawlessness. In a more creative and sensitive manner J.P. Clark examines a similar situation through Ebriere in Song of a Goat<sup>57</sup>. For a long time, Ebriere agrees to bear the taunts and abuses of her community for failure to provide a second child because she loves her husband and therefore does not want to expose his impotence.

Notice the use of traditional religion in Lindiwe to justify the

practice whereby a woman sleeps with her in-law to produce a child. Deborah's husband explains to his brother that his decision to send him to father his child stems from a dream in which he has heard one of his ancestors tell that Lindiwe has to be born to Deborah and her brother-in-law.

Although Deborah's passivity can be explained as part of traditional subservience of women towards men, it is not plausible for a woman to agree to sleep with a man as mechanically and as easily as Deborah agrees to sleep with Dumdum. After all, in spite of the fact that Dumdum is her brother-in-law, it is implied that the two of them are virtually strangers owing to some enmity between the brothers. Writing from a male viewpoint, Mekgoe does not attempt to empathise with his heroine and envisage the psychological effects she may have suffered as a result of the childlessness and the subsequent desertion by her husband. He treats Deborah as a kind of automaton. Notice this from the mechanical way in which she agrees to sleep with her brother-in-law:

Deborah: Will he (Dabula) come back then?

Dumdum: Yes, but only after a child is born ... the child that is long awaited. And it is the will of our ancestors that I provide this child, uLindiwe.

Deborah: uLindiwe?

Dumdum: Yes, umtwana ...

Deborah: (Smiling) It's like a dream come true to me, a child.

Dumdum: It's like a family reunion to me, a wife.

Deborah: But you never visited us. Why?

Dumdum: We were at loggerheads with my brother ...

Deborah: But he did come to you at last.

Dumdum: And I came to you at last. (Embracing) Eh, don't forget the name ... uLindiwe.

Deborah: I won't.

Kisses him, and they both exit.<sup>58</sup>

There is a great difference between the treatment of Deborah here and that of Ebriere in J.P. Clark's Song of a Goat.<sup>59</sup>

Clark is more sensitive to his heroine and gives her a great deal of attention as a human being showing the kind of psychological tension she undergoes as a result of her misfortune and as a victim of rigid traditionalism.

This chapter has discussed the representation and the role of women in African traditional context and in the context of changing social values. It has been observed that in the traditional milieu women play stereotyped roles and these roles often come into conflict with women's personal needs as individual human beings. It has also been observed that, owing to the low social status women occupy in the traditional setting, they are often victimized when there are cultural conflicts between traditionalism and modernism.

One important point which emerges from the attitude of the playwrights whose works are examined in this chapter is that many of them are very critical of traditionalism and the kind of life to which it subjects women. From the problems raised by these playwrights it



would appear that many of them would not recommend a return to traditionalism as a solution to the contemporary cultural transitional dilemmas.

The next chapter examines the representation and role of women in their struggles to come to terms with a relatively new social situation in Africa; that is the urban environment.

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE URBAN WOMAN

The urban environment is a relatively new phenomenon in Africa, having been introduced only a century ago during the colonial era. Several social factors distinguish the urban from the traditional milieu. There is no communal cohesion since the people are not linked by blood, clan or ethnic ties as in the traditional setting. The limitation of resources leads to competitiveness between people and also to a certain degree of rebellion against traditionally acquired morals and etiquette.

Partly owing to the challenging nature of the urban situation and partly because of the absence of a social establishment to monitor individuals' adherence to stereotyped roles, the urban woman is more ready to express a greater degree of independence for her social and economic survival than her traditional counterpart. This inevitable courage vis à vis a challenging environment has led to a situation whereby the urban woman is viewed as a rebel and as a threat to the established 'normal' male-female relationships.

Considering that she has to play roles which are relatively new in Africa, the urban woman can in many respects be regarded as a cultural pace-setter. Conservatism is a common characteristic of many societies;

people are more inclined towards coping with age-old established norms, however unsatisfactory, than to struggling to adapt their life-styles into new modes of behaviour. It is as a result of this that prejudices arise against the pace-setters of new ways of life. Consequently, the urban African woman has been and still is a victim of many social prejudices.

To write credible creative literature demands sensitivity to the human condition on the part of the author and a challenging social situation such as the urban African environment gives a writer heavy responsibility in this direction. Owing to the prejudice against urban areas as corrupting elements there is a tendency for authors to present stereotyped characters. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how far selected African playwrights have managed to avoid projecting a distorted image of the urban woman by their sensitivity to the kinds of problems with which she has to contend in this new environment.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The discussion begins by criticizing the projection of a distorted image of the urban woman as an evil temptress and as a corrupting agent. The chapter then moves on to examine the presentation of the urban woman of loose sexual morals, the culturally alienated woman and lastly the professional woman.

#### The Evil Temptress and Corrupting Agent

'Segun Ajibade (M) Nigeria: Rakinyo 1975



Jacob Hevi (M) Ghana: Amavi 1975

Victor Musinga (M) Cameroon: The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance 1975

In Jacob Hevi's Amavi<sup>1</sup>, Victor Musinga's The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance<sup>2</sup> and 'Segun Ajibade's Rakinyo<sup>3</sup> the urban woman is represented as a corrupting agent in her relationship with men. If the male characters in these plays disintegrate in their moral strength and if their relationships with others go sour, responsibility for this is shown to lie with some evil urban woman.

In Amavi, before the introduction of Sewa, the urban woman, Kokutse is shown to be a very loving and caring husband to Amavi. The couple leads a simple life in the countryside and they have an honest and close relationship whereby they work hard together and plan their every move together.

After meeting and becoming friends with Sewa, however, Kokutse is shown to undergo a drastic transformation. From the loving husband and loving father he was before this, he becomes a cruel brute. Notice this from his unceremonial and beastly attitude towards Amavi and their children when he brings Sewa home as his second wife:

Kokutse: Why are you all gazing at me like bulls. Can't you give me water? Or you don't see the guest standing?  
(Kwami brings him a cup of water) Not me. Give it to Sewa (Kwami first looks round, a bit confused)  
Or, you don't hear me?

Kwami: (Looking at the young woman gives the water to her.  
He waits to take the cup back) Shall I bring you more?

Kokutse: (Suddenly turning on Kwami) Is that what you are taught at school? (Shouting) Run and bring me some too! Quick! (Kwami runs for the water.)

Meanwhile Amavi has finished her work) Kodzono!

Amavi: Papa! (She hurries up to him and stands before him)

Kokutse: Remove your things to the empty room near the children's. (he turns towards Sewa) Sewa, take your things into my room.

Amavi gazes at him dumbfounded for some time.<sup>4</sup>

Sewa is presented as an evil temptress who lures Kokutse into the urban world, dehumanizes him and thus alienating him from his wife and children. Her portrayal appears to be an attempt by the playwright to demonstrate that urban women are immoral where the rural women are moral. Where the country woman Amavi is presented as honest and hardworking, Sewa is portrayed as dishonest, full of intrigue and extremely lazy. The eventual disintegration of the once happy marriage between Kokutse and Amavi is blamed entirely on Sewa.

It is not clear in the play how the mere fact of Sewa being an urban woman endows her with so much power of evil. Her very youth (the villagers say that she is a mere school-girl!) throws some doubt on the plausibility of her having acquired so much experience in evil and intrigue. It seems an exaggeration that Kokutse can be so overwhelmed by her that his love for Amavi and the strength and determination with which he and the latter have tamed the land to go such a long way economically cannot be used to patch up their once happy relationship.

Prejudice against urban women as corrupting agents is not limited to their influence on the family level; it extends to the public level as well. The disintegration of Mr No-Balance's character and his

eventual professional downfall in The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance is blamed on an urban woman. Mbarama is presented as the evil temptress who leads Mr No-Balance into taking bribes. She represents the stereotype of the urban African woman; dehumanized, lazy and greedy for money. It is her desire to lead a luxurious easy life and her greed for money which is shown to spur Mr No-Balance on the road to public corruption. And as soon as she has acquired enough money and Mr No-Balance's downfall is imminent, she flees, leaving him to face the consequences of taking bribes alone.

Corruption in public affairs is an unfortunate but a very common characteristic of life in post-independence Africa and it has caused the downfall of many government officials. In this regard Mr No-Balance represents those officials who have met tragic ends due to lack of integrity and stability in their jobs. But the representation of urban women as the cause of these officials' downfall reflects a chauvinistic attitude on the part of the playwright. The very description of Mbarama as a Jezebel shows that the author takes women to be the embodiment of evil and wickedness.<sup>6</sup>

The image of urban women reflected in Ajibade's Rakinyo in their relationship to men is similar to that given in The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance. Rakinyo's eventual downfall is blamed on two urban women who are presented as evil temptresses and corrupting agents.

Rakinyo loses his rural wife through the latter's corruption by an urban woman. Elizabeth uses the promise of a lazy and exuberant life in the urban area to lure Awero from Rakinyo so that she can occupy her



place as the latter's wife. Elizabeth uses her intimacy with Awero to tempt her away from her husband. The situation we are presented with about the two women is very unrealistic and can only be explained by the author's bias against the city and urban women as having tremendous corrupting power. The two women are said to have been intimate friends for a long time before the events in the play begin taking place; how the friendship withers just because Elizabeth is an urban woman is not explained. It is shocking to see how fast Awero changes immediately Elizabeth talks to her. From a hard-working and committed rural woman Awero is transformed into a stereotyped urban woman whose sole interest is a life of glamour, money and relaxation.

Rakinyo's direct evil temptress is his second urban wife Bimpe. This character is presented as a dehumanized woman who is greedy for money and has an inexplicable urge to lead the man into destruction. Bimpe's character does not develop naturally; she is manipulated by the playwright to fit into his view of urban woman. Her power of exploitation of Rakinyo is grossly exaggerated to illustrate the material greed the playwright imagines urban women to have. For example, within a very short period, Bimpe is shown to have squeezed out of Rakinyo a house for each of her many relatives and in addition, a car and a regular financial allowance of petrol for one of her brothers. In spite of this, she is not satisfied; she still plans to drain Rakinyo of all his money and divert his attention from caring for his relatives.

The height of Bimpe's evil is when she incites Rakinyo to murder his sick father claiming that this way he will be getting rid of an

economic problem. This murder is indulgence in evil for the sake of evil; there is nothing Bimpe is to gain from this murder other than seeing how powerful she can be in leading a man into destruction.

Like The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance, Rakinyo appears to be a play geared towards confirming distorted views on the urban African woman. The female characters are so one-sided that it is difficult not to see the playwrights as working from prejudiced positions. The mercenary relationship of Mbarama and Bimpe to their respective men are tailored to fit the stereotyped image of urban women which is expressed by one of the male characters when he says, 'How do you make Rakinyo realize that women are birds that fly away as soon as the tree branch breaks?'<sup>7</sup>

#### The Woman of Loose Sexual Morals

Femi Euba (M) Nigeria:	<u>The Game</u> 1968
Ime Ikiddeh (M) Nigeria:	<u>Blind Cyclos</u> 1968
David Mulwa (M) Kenya:	<u>Eyes of Judgement</u> 1985
Jagjit Singh (M) Uganda:	<u>Sweet Scum of Freedom</u> 1973

The woman of loose sexual morals is perhaps the most recurrent female character type in urban African literature. In African drama, she is presented either as an unfaithful wife or a prostitute.

It is unfortunate that although she is perhaps the most recurrent character in African urban drama, the woman of loose sexual morals is the least realistically represented female character. Most playwrights lack sensitivity and understanding when it comes to the portrayal of

this character. Few playwrights go beyond the surface of her behaviour to show the dialectical relationship between her so-called immorality and her socio-economic background. In many plays, she is presented as a cardboard character with no life outside her 'immoral' social interaction.

Ime Ikiddeh and Femi Euba show lack of sensitivity and understanding towards the urban woman of loose sexual morals in Blind Cyclos<sup>8</sup> and The Game<sup>9</sup>, respectively. Both playwrights avoid giving importance to the socio-economic background which causes their female characters' sexual laxity. The writers also exhibit a great deal of cynicism towards these women's so-called immoral life.

In Blind Cyclos, the way in which Elisa is portrayed makes it difficult for the audience to relate to her as a human being and therefore understand her predicaments in her struggle to survive in the urban environment. Elisa is presented without any personal idiosyncrasies as a character. The playwright merely uses her as one of the tools to explore his views on human relationships in the urban areas. Ikiddeh sees human relationships as built on needs rather than fellow-feeling. This is the basis of the relationship between Elisa and the wealthy businessman Olemu; it is also shown to be the basis of the woman's friendship with the policeman Austin.

Olemu is presented as one of those new wealthy people in the urban areas who regard human beings as commodities. Although Ikiddeh is critical of this attitude he is not sympathetic towards the women like Elisa who risk being dehumanized by getting used as commodities by



these nouveaux-riches. Apart from sexual exploitation, Elisa is used by Olemu in his election campaigns; she is the man's stepping stone in reaching the female members of the electorate. Ikiddeh presents the couple's relationship in a way which suggests that he derives cynical laughter from it. Notice this from the following excerpt of their dialogue:

Olemu: Close the window - we must hurry, Elisa. I have to collect rents today, too ...

Elisa: Your wife is lucky. You only remember me when you want the window shut.

Olemu: Don't be impossible, Liz! You know how many nights I have spent here. But these weeks ... (Softening) But I can't help it! You're so sweet!

Elisa: (flattered) Then call me honey.

Olemu: No, you're sweeter. Simply overwhelming! Like some unexpected money. Won't you close the window now?

Elisa: (sharp again) Yes, I am fit for that only.

Olemu: Oh, come on, you've been very useful during these campaigns.

Elisa: Are you going to give me something for the weekend or not?

Olemu: How much do you want? Lock the door first.

Elisa: Only seven pounds.<sup>10</sup>

Ikiddeh's cynicism towards the plight of the urban woman of loose sexual morals is shown in his presentation of Elisa's relationship with the policeman Austin. The money Elisa gets from her services to Olemu is spent by Austin. This is a pathetic situation considering that Elisa has many dependants who look up to her for their survival. But

the playwright's attitude to the situation is that of a cynical observer. The question which hangs from the playwright's attitude when Elisa complains about her exploitation by Austin is, does she not realize that she has to pay for the sex services she gets from Austin since the latter is a better lover than Olemu?

The final statement of Blind Cyclos is condemnatory towards urban women. At the discovery that Olemu shares his girlfriend, the policeman accelerates his investigations on the businessman's corrupt activities and eventually puts him into trouble. As in the case of Mr No-Balance in The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance<sup>11</sup> the urban woman is shown to be responsible for men's tragedies. Ikiddeh's criticism is heavier on the woman's involvement in the exposure of Olemu's corruption than on corruption as an aspect of moral sterility in the urban area. The conclusion which the play seems to draw is that the policeman and the corrupt businessman would have related to each other as brothers if it were not for the urban women of loose sexual morals.

The representation of urban women in Femi Euba's The Game<sup>12</sup> is as cynical as that in Blind Cyclos. Here, the playwright introduces the phenomenon of extra-marital relationships in the city. This is a new social problem; in the urban area particularly it is caused by the breakdown in the traditional values and the introduction of new living conditions. But instead of viewing it as such and as a problem affecting both men and women, Euba stands aside as a cynical observer and blames women.

Awero is the childless second wife of a wealthy urban businessman

and has an extra-marital affair with one of her husband's employees. In choosing a female character who is childless, the playwright already shows his biases against urban women. Considering the importance of the procreational role for women, Awero's childlessness in the first place gives her the image of a stereotyped urban woman who has no family responsibilities. Secondly, by limiting this woman's social interaction to her relationship with her lover the playwright denies her the chance to reveal herself as a character whom the audience can view as a human being instead of judging her only as an immoral person. Finally, like Ikiddeh in Blind Cyclos, Euba refuses to give due importance to the root causes of his heroine's sexual laxity. Awero's husband is one of the African nouveaux-riches who are so involved in their search for money and in their exhibitionist attitude towards life that they have no time for their families. This social factor which could be used to explain Awero's involvement in an extra-marital affair is mentioned only in passing.

The role of female characters in Blind Cyclos and The Game seems to be that of providing farcical humour. The two playwrights seem to derive a great deal of cynical laughter from their heroine's sexual escapades. This kind of cynicism is insensitive and does not go with serious creative writing.

In Eyes of Judgement<sup>13</sup> and Sweet Scum of Freedom<sup>14</sup>, David Mulwa and Jagjit Singh, respectively, are sympathetic towards their urban female characters of loose sexual morals, but their portrayal of these women is limited by these playwrights' inability to empathize with



them fully.

In Eyes of Judgement we are presented with a widow who, by common traditional practice, has been inherited by her brother-in-law. After living with the brother-in-law for only a short while, the widow rejects her new husband on the pretext of his poverty and tells him to his face that she will henceforth prostitute herself for money.

There is no conflict between Amina and Mwaruwa to prepare the audience for the woman's rejection of the latter. Her mechanical rejection of the loving new husband merely because his attempts to find a job have proved fruitless shows the playwright's inability to empathize with his heroine. The mere fact of poverty does not necessarily make a woman dishonest and indecent and it is incredible that it is Amina herself who is made to articulate the playwright's view of slum women as lacking in honesty. She says: 'Honesty! Since when did any wise slum dweller boast of honesty?'<sup>15</sup>

Abortions and abandonment of children are common social problems in the slums of Africa owing to the economic deprivation of the women living in these areas. Arising out of these problems is a prejudice against urban poor women as sexually immoral and as lacking maternal feelings. Although Mulwa sees poverty as the root cause of abortions and abandonment of children, the way in which he represents urban poor women through Amina shows that he subscribes to the erroneous view of these women as dehydrated of human feelings. This is illustrated by the way in which he presents Amina's order of her daughter to undergo an abortion and her subsequent abandonment of the latter when she

refuses to have her ~~pregnancy terminated~~. Notice the clinical attitude which Amina is made to assume in the following excerpt of her dialogue with Rasha:

Amina: (storming) Your father's last wish was that you do well in school ... You choose between me and your father's last wish and an illegitimate brat out there in the darkness. I'm not going to work and feed a fatherless brat in my own house. Life is hard enough without howling babies and costly nappies ...

Rasha: Mama you chose to have me. You didn't call Mama Isa to take my life before I had taken my first breath on earth!

Amina: Yes you child! Your father and I chose to keep you because you were a legal child - with a father and a mother - legally married.<sup>16</sup>

In Sweet Scum of Freedom<sup>17</sup> Jagjit Singh is sympathetic towards the urban women of loose sexual morals but, like Mulwa in Eyes of Judgement, he is unable to empathize fully with his heroine. Singh shows his sympathies towards the women of loose sexual morals by taking a broad definition of the term 'prostitute' to denote general social corruption and hypocrisy. Working from this kind of perspective, Singh argues that many people in a new independent African country are prostitutes in private, while in public they put on a veneer of respectability. In this game, the playwright shows that women of loose sexual morals are used as scapegoats for general moral laxity of society.

In his attempt to show that women of loose sexual morals are not as lacking in social awareness as is generally assumed the playwright uses his prostitute heroine as his mouthpiece to state his

position. 'Look at our African ministers', says Anna, 'Always drinking and dancing at Lorina with malayas\*. Freedom or no freedom we're the same old malayas always.'<sup>18</sup> In order to highlight his attitude that women of loose sexual morals are merely used as scapegoats for general social immorality, Singh juxtaposes these women with the important Minister for Culture and shows the latter to be much more corrupt than these women.

There are two aspects of Sweet Scum of Freedom, however, which detract from the playwright's sympathies for his female characters. Singh distances himself from his characters and assumes a journalistic attitude which reduces his seriousness and thus gives a melodramatic tone to the problems he is examining. This makes the playwright appear as a mere photographer rather than a sensitive creative writer.

#### The Culturally Alienated Woman

Innocent Banda (M) Malawi: Lord Have Mercy 1976

Guillaume Oyono-Mbia (M) Cameroon:  
Notre fille ne se mariera pas 1969

Kobina Sekyi (M) Ghana: The Blinkards 1915

The theme of cultural alienation is a very important one in African creative writing. The major aim of writers who explore this theme is to discourage indiscriminate assimilation of foreign (Western) values and to help Africa regain her sense of cultural direction which

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\* Swahili word for 'prostitutes'.



was threatened with destruction after her contact with the West. This section focusses on the representation and role of women in the examination of the theme of cultural alienation in African drama.

Many African playwrights recognize the important role played by women in cultural development. As mothers, they are the educators of the youth and hence the carriers of culture from one generation to the next. In this light, the theatre which is aimed at helping to maintain a sense of cultural stability in women is very important as in the final analysis it contributes to the cultural stability of an entire society. Most of the plays on cultural alienation are satirical. While recognizing the role played by these plays in helping to maintain the cultural balance of women and society in general, a critic cannot ignore the tendency of some playwrights to reveal their prejudices against women as they ridicule thoughtless westernization. There is no explanation, for example, why the women in Innocent Banda's Lord Have Mercy<sup>19</sup> and Guillaume Oyono-Mbia's Notre fille ne se mariera pas<sup>20</sup> are presented as culturally confused while their husbands who have had a taste of Western education just like their wives are presented as able to synthesize what is valid in African cultures with what is relevant from the Western culture. There is a tendency to regard women as more easily fooled by new values than men.

Petronella in Lord Have Mercy represents those urban women who hold the erroneous view held by the culturally alienated Africans that cutting oneself off from one's African roots is a mark of being civilized in the Western sense and an indication that one is superior

to the rural folk who still hold traditional African values. Notice this from her indignation at being reminded of her African roots in the following excerpt:

Cousin:    (Laughs) Can't your man leave you for a bit? ...  
              Tell me, are there no such things in your village?

Petronella: I have no village.

Cousin:    But Tom said you were from the South somewhere.

Petronella: No, I am not.

Cousin:    But how can that be?

Petronella: It's a long story. My father was a diplomat.  
              I was brought up abroad. So I can't be from 'the  
              South somewhere', whatever Tom meant.<sup>21</sup>

Petronella does not have any specific conviction as to why she should prefer European ways to African. She suffers from the inferiority complex afflicting the culturally unstable African people which makes them regard everything European as good and everything African as bad. She does not consider the practical aspects of the things she assimilates from the West and those she rejects from Africa. To her, for example, the ideal house servant is not the one who does his job to her satisfaction but 'somebody you would employ if you were a white man'.<sup>22</sup>

There is a certain degree of prejudice against women in Lord Have Mercy. Petronella's husband, Tom, is Western educated just like his wife. There is no reason, therefore, why only the woman is used as the victim of satire against the culturally alienated. In addition, there is no reason why Petronella is taken as the cause of the widening

gap between her husband and his relatives. The portrayal of Petronella is based on a widely held prejudice against educated urban wives. In most of Africa it is still believed that educated urban women are arrogant and that they monopolise their husbands so much that the latter can no longer communicate with their relatives after their marriage to these women. Notice the implication of this attitude from Cousin (Tom's Cousin) when she asks, 'Can't your man leave you for a bit?'<sup>23</sup> This prejudice arises from the fact that western education gives women an independence which the African society finds difficult to accommodate.

Although Petronella in Banda's Lord Have Mercy and Colette in Oyono-Mbia's Notre fille ne se mariera pas<sup>24</sup> have identical cultural backgrounds, both of them having been brought up overseas, a significant difference can be observed in the degree of their cultural alienation. While recognizing that part of this difference could be attributed to the variation in the way in which Oyono-Mbia and Banda handle their material as playwrights, it would be a grave mistake not to take the differing cultural backgrounds of the two plays into consideration.

Banda portrays his heroine from a perspective of an Anglophone background while Oyono-Mbia relates his heroine's experiences to a Francophone background. In order to understand the differences in the degree of alienation suffered by the two heroines, the cultural differences of the parents who brought up the two women overseas must be appreciated. In the British colonies, education on cultural matters for the indigenous African people was only part of the general



instruction geared towards acquisition of skills; it was not an attempt to make 'Englishmen' and 'Englishwomen' out of the educated Africans. In the French colonies, on the contrary, under the so-called assimilation policy, one of the major aims of the French in educating Africans was to mould 'Frenchmen' and 'Frenchwomen' out of the few Africans who could successfully go through the rigours of the requirements of becoming évolués or cultured people. With this background in mind, therefore, Colette's parents must have been évolués, for them to actually qualify to live in France. This is the background to Colette's extreme cultural alienation.

Colette behaves in a way which suggests that her upbringing was aimed at making her into a French lady. Unlike Petronella who at least can speak an African language when necessary, Colette cannot speak or understand a word in an African language. As a basic means of communication between human beings, language is an important cultural foundation. Colette's denial of an African language therefore shows the extent of her cultural emptiness as an African. She sees her marriage to Atangana as having robbed her of complete assimilation into the French culture which she would have attained through marrying a Frenchman and henceforth living in France. She laments about this when she says:

J'aurais pu épouser un Français et vivre en France! Tout le monde me disait que je serais la première Brigitte Bardot noire, mais j'ai renoncé à mon avenir de vedette à cause de lui.<sup>25</sup>

In his portrayal of Colette, Oyono-Mbia satirizes the dehumanising

effect of taking culture at face value. Colette takes culture to be important for its own sake but not for the way in which it contributes to human beings' life. Colette has deified the French culture and now worships it in a way which makes her appear as a robot rather than a human being. But like Mrs Brofusen in Kobina Sekyi's The Blinkards<sup>26</sup>, the cultural aspects Colette is borrowing from the West are decadent and completely irrelevant to the African situation. Like Sekyi, Oyono-Mbia sees the indiscriminate assimilation of foreign values by women as dangerous for the future of Africa in that it can lead to the cultural alienation of the younger generation. Oyono-Mbia's criticism of the tendency of the African nouveaux-riches to create little imaginary Europes in Africa for their children is apparent from his satire against the way in which his heroine brings up her son:

Dieu sait pourtant que je fais de mon mieux pour lui apprendre à vivre! Le chauffeur va le déposer à l'école urbaine chaque matin pour éviter que les autres enfants ne lui parlent en langue vernaculaire. J'ai déjà renvoyé trois ou quatre maîtres d'hôtel parce qu'ils lui servaient de mangues, des ananas et d'autres fruits du pays au lieu de ne lui donner que des produits importés d'Europe ou à la rigueur des fruits africains mis en conserve en Europe, et réimportés. Je ne l'autorise presque jamais à aller rendre visite à la famille de son père parce que les gens de la brousse ne boivent que de l'eau non filtrée ...

Enfin je fais tout ce qu'une Africaine moderne devrait faire pour éduquer son enfant ...<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to ignore the sharp contrast between Colette and her husband Atangana in their approach to cultural matters. Whereas his wife embraces the French culture wholesale, and rejects values of African traditions indiscriminately, Atangana synchronizes the good

from either culture. This contrast highlights Colette's cultural alienation but also raises the question of the playwright's fairness in his representation of women.

Other male playwrights, for example Innocent Banda in Lord Have Mercy<sup>28</sup> and Ebrahim Hussein in Wakati Ukuta (Time is a Wall)<sup>29</sup>, have given similar contrasting images of men and women in their plays. The sentiments behind these playwrights' exposure of cultural alienation is positive, recognizing that these are attempts aimed at contributing to the development of a sense of direction in transitional Africa. However, the point which cannot be overlooked is the way in which female characters are constantly used as victims of satire against cultural alienation while the men are presented as culturally stable. Perhaps the explanation for this apparent discrimination against women can be found in the fact that these plays are based on patriarchal African societies where men are held with high regard and every effort is made to boost a positive male image even at the expense of the female image. A contrast between these plays and Kobina Sekyi's The Blinkards based on the matrilineal Fante society illustrates this point.

Although The Blinkards is not as artistically strong and as overtly pro-women as, for example, Efua Sutherland's Foriwa<sup>30</sup> based on the same matrilineal society as Sekyi's play, its approach to the theme of cultural alienation in a way which does not discriminate against women is nevertheless noteworthy. Sekyi views both men and women as facing the danger of cultural alienation and therefore uses female as well as male characters as victims of his satire against



thoughtless assimilation of western ways of life. This playwright also sees women as important in re-establishing a sense of direction when a society seems to be falling apart culturally.

Sekyi uses Mrs Brofusen to represent those African women who, in the early years of Africa's westernization as well as in the contemporary period, ape the little titbits of Western culture that they have come across in their limited experience. Mrs Brofusen is made to appear absurd when she exhibits behaviour which is inapplicable to the African situation with the hope of giving the impression that she is now a lady. Mr Tsiba appears equally absurd in his struggle to get his daughter moulded into a lady by the ridiculous Mrs Brofusen. Though in a somewhat simplistic manner, the playwright uses Miss Tsiba and her fiancé to represent the younger generation whose cultural stability is threatened by what is analysed as the culture of imitation in the play.

The important factor which distinguishes The Blinkards from the plays from patrilineal backgrounds is the way in which the playwright underlines the role of women in re-establishing the direction of society at the verge of cultural insanity. Nana Katawirwa, Miss Tsiba's maternal grandmother, plays the important role of the embodiment of the vitality of the traditional Fante culture. She is presented as a very strong woman who is not afraid of challenging the whole crowd of imitators. Notice her categorical stand when she arrives from the countryside to the urban area to find her granddaughter married, apparently in the English style, without the

necessary traditional Fante engagement arrangements:

Nana Kat: (To Mr Tsiba, calmly) As soon as I received your letter, I set out, when I arrived, I was told you and Araba were here. What are you doing here? (To Miss Tsiba) What does this white dress you are wearing mean? What are all these people here for?

Miss Tsi: (sobbing) I -- am -- a -- bride.

Nana Kat: Say that again.

Mr Ok: (Placing an arm round Miss Tsiba) She says she is a bride. She is my wife.

Nana Kat: (Angrily removing Mr Okadu's hand) Take care how you court trouble; this child is nothing to you.

Mr Tsi: She is Okadu's bride. We have only just come out of the church. This is the reception. We did it in the English manner.

Nana Kat: It seems to me these wines on the table have made you all drunk. I know that nobody has asked my grand-daughter in marriage. Don't tell me any barbarous tales ...

Mr Tsi: I say we did it in the English manner.

Nana Kat: If this is English, then the English are barbarians. (To Miss Tsiba) I am your mother's mother: you belong to my family. Come away with me. (Takes Miss Tsiba's hand and turns to leave the hall. Mr Okadu attempts to force Nana Katawirwa's hand away. Nana Katawirwa slaps him on the face.)

Nana Kat: Learn to respect the mother who bore you.<sup>31</sup>

It is from Nana Katawirwa's intervention that the imitators begin to question themselves about their blind assimilation of the English culture and their indiscriminate rejection of their own. The old woman's readiness to utilise the services of a Western-educated lawyer

indicates her recognition of the fact that her traditional culture cannot afford to remain intact in a new world. However, her approach to the assimilation of new practices differs from that of the imitators in the way in which she accepts only those aspects of the English culture which add some vitality and are relevant to her own culture.

### The Professional Woman

Joe de Graft (M) Ghana:	<u>Sons and Daughters</u> 1964
Francis Kamau (M) Kenya:	<u>The Positive Volunteers</u> 1977
Victor Musinga (M) Cameroon:	<u>The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance</u> 1976
Jean Pliya (M) Dahomey:	<u>La secrétaire particulière</u> 1973

For the purposes of this study, a professional woman is categorized as any woman who is engaged in a vocation which is dependent on skills acquired from formal (Western) education.

Owing to her initiation into the Western culture through school and her subsequent independence from African stereotyped female roles, the professional woman has become a victim of social prejudice. She has to work harder than the man to prove her competence in jobs which popular opinion has for a long time regarded as exclusively male domain. Her seriousness and competence in these jobs is greatly undervalued. The professional woman finds herself a victim of sexual harassment and discrimination at work because male colleagues are unwilling to come to terms with the fact that at work a woman is a



colleague and not simply a sex object.

This section examines selected playwrights' representation of the professional African woman. Playwrights who are not politically aware of and sensitive to the position of African women portray female characters who illustrate that these writers subscribe to the social prejudices against the professional women. An example of these playwrights is Victor Musinga in The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance<sup>32</sup>.

Playwrights who are sensitive to the plight of professional women present female characters who are very strong both morally and professionally. In addition they are explicitly critical of male officials who are not prepared to respect women as colleagues but regard them as sex objects. In these plays sharp contrasts are drawn between the strong heroines and their male antagonists. These plays are represented by Francis Kamau's The Positive Volunteers<sup>33</sup>, Jean Pliya's La secrétaire particulière<sup>34</sup>, and Joe de Graft's Sons and Daughters<sup>35</sup>.

Victor Musinga's The Tragedy of Mr No-Balance has already been examined above in connection with the presentation of women as evil temptresses and corrupting agents. Musinga's representation of professional women is as biased as that of women in their general interaction with men. His portrayal of Inspector Maggie, an investigating officer, shows his negative attitude towards women as people who can never attain the same professional respectability as men. In her investigation of Mr No-Balance's corruption, Maggie is presented as an evil temptress rather than a person engaged in a

professional mission. Her very name, Inspector Maggie, has a cheap tone to it and immediately waters down any respect due to her as a woman involved in a difficult profession. Notice how her description of herself blends the image of an evil temptress with that of a prostitute:

Three faces wears Officer Maggie when first sought,  
Confidence, submissiveness and investigation half-wrought;  
The investigation over, she seeks her fee,  
The devil looks less fearful than she.<sup>36</sup>

Maggie's use of flirtation, cunning and deception to lure Mr No-Balance into incriminating himself prejudices the audience against her; she gives the impression of being a representative of a cruel female race rather than that of an officer on duty.

In The Positive Volunteers and La secrétaire particulière Kamau and Pliya, respectively, discuss a problem of professional women which is very prevalent in contemporary Africa. This is the situation whereby female employees, such as secretaries, who are directly under male officials are sexually harassed and exploited by the latter. These playwrights' sympathies for women in such positions are shown by the negative picture they project of the corrupt male officials and the contrasting positive image of those female professionals who do not succumb to sexual exploitation.

The picture we get of Mr Kolobo of The Positive Volunteers is that of an irresponsible drunkard who does not live up to his name as a personnel manager. His secretary, on the other hand, is presented as a person who is very conscious of her responsibilities and who has great respect for her official position as well as that of her boss.

This contrast can be noticed from dialogues where Mr Kolobo makes advances to Rosemary; the man is shown to be crude and detestable where the young woman is refined and respectable:

Mr Kolobo:        (With a husky voice) Hello, love.

Rosemary:        Good morning Mr Kolobo.

Mr Kolobo:        (cross and throwing the now dwindling cigarette away) What do you mean? (imitating her) "Good morning Mr Kolobo?" Why the deuce do you have to keep Koloboing me? Can't you for once drop that stupid elevated air of yours? (hiccup) and call me Richard (Belching loudly.) ...

Rosemary:        (Taking some papers to Mr Kolobo's office) Please Mr Kolobo, don't let us begin all that once again, I implore you.

Mr Kolobo:        (Menacingly) What do you think I am, eh? A porcupine or something? You hardly ever step near me or even give me a smile ...<sup>37</sup>

The contrast between Rosemary and Mr Kolobo is parallel to that between Virginie and Monsieur Chadas in Jean Pliya's La secrétaire particulière. The role of Virginie in this play is to demonstrate the rewards of a professional woman who refuses to be turned into a sex object by her male superiors. Unlike Nathalie in the same play, who loses her respect and spoils her future by succumbing to sexual exploitation, Virginie gains not only promotion but also professional respectability from her colleagues. This is because of her courage to stand against sexual harassment. Where Nathalie has accepted the position of a sex object for the boss, Virginie maintains remarkable self-respect from which she derives the courage to oppose M. Chadas' sexual approaches. She refuses to have that inferiority complex of



junior female professionals of which men like M. Chadas take advantage. Notice her self-respect and her self-confidence from her opposition of M. Chadas:

J'accepte de faire tout le travail que vous voudrez me confier, mais je ne m'abaisserais jamais au rang d'une gourgandine. Si vous osez me toucher comme vous venez de le faire j'en conclus que vous n'avez point de respect pour vous-même et je vous insulterais ou vous giflerais. Je tiens à mon honneur.<sup>38</sup>

M. Chadas, on the other hand, is portrayed as a cruel and corrupt lecher who does not deserve the high official position he occupies. He has three wives already yet it has become a habit for him to initiate sexual relationships with all his female juniors. This is a lifestyle he leads for the sheer fun of it since to him women are not officials or human beings in the same way as men, but sex objects. Notice this from his attitude when Nathalie informs him that she is pregnant with his baby:

Nathalie: ... /Je/ suis heureuse de t'annoncer que j'attends un enfant.

M. Chadas: Quoi? Quoi? Tu attends un enfant! Quel enfant? Mais je ne te savais pas mariée. As-tu au moins un fiancé?

Nathalie: Tu devrais le savoir.

M. Chadas: Me fais-tu des confidences à ce propos? Assez de plaisanterie! Qui est le père de cet enfant?

Nathalie: Tu ne devrais pas me poser cette question: rejouis-toi d'avoir un enfant de plus.

M. Chadas: (rit jaune) Tu veux plaisanter ma chère. J'ai déjà une quinzaine d'enfants. Avec 3 femmes à la fois c'est vite arrivé. Mais cela suffit comme ça.<sup>39</sup>

The portrayal of M. Chadas and Mr Kolobo is similar to that of Lawyer Bonu in Joe de Graft's Sons and Daughters.<sup>40</sup> Bonu is a respected lawyer who owns a well-established and prosperous legal firm. The irony behind the respect with which his community regard him comes through when one considers his attitude towards his female employees. In the office, at least, Lawyer Bonu would be expected to treat professional women with the respect due to them in their official capacity since he is a man of the law where justice is supposed to be a major pillar. Yet, to him, female employees are mere sex objects and he will use any crooked means to sleep with them. It is in an intrigue to sleep with Mana'an, his best friend's daughter, that he has employed her as an apprentice in his office. Mana'an would like to pursue a course on dance-drama but, under the influence of Lawyer Bonu, her father wants her to study law. The lawyer plays a double-faced role whereby he takes advantage of his friendship with James (Mana'an's father) on the one hand, and on the other, Mana'an's strong desire to do dance-drama in his attempt to sleep with the young lady.

Mana'an's courage and stubbornness in resisting Lawyer Bonu's blackmail is comparable to that of Virginie in La secrétaire particulière. De Graft's critical attitude towards men like Lawyer Bonu and his sensitivity to the plight of women in Mana'an's position is reflected by the contrasting images he projects of the two characters. Where Mana'an is strong and respectable, Lawyer Bonu is presented as crude and detestable as well as a man with no morals. Like Kolobo in The Positive Volunteers the Lawyer is presented as

exhibiting animal behaviour in his approaches to female officials; this literary device helps highlight professional women's vulnerable positions in jobs headed by corrupt men.

Lawyer B: Don't you want to go on stage? Don't you want to study dancing and be able to create your own ballet? Don't you? You do, Mana'an; I know you do, and I can help you to achieve your ambition. I can make your father grant your wish ...

Mana'an: I don't want your help, Lawyer Bonu. I don't want anything from you. Aren't you ashamed to stand there and tell me that, right under my father's roof? Why do you pester my life like this?

Lawyer B: Because I love you, Mana'an.

Mana'an: You who are old enough to be my father? ...

(Mana'an gives him a long stare full of contempt, then turns to walk away ... With a swift movement Lawyer Bonu bars her way.) ...

Lawyer B: No, Mana'an, I'll not allow you to pass unless you let me kiss you. Come ... don't you see that I love you? ...

Mana'an: I wonder you have the heart to say such things, you a married man and a respected gentleman of this town. What would Mrs Bonu say if she saw you now and heard your words?

Lawyer B: This has nothing to do with my wife ... Nobody need know about it ...

(Mana'an in a sudden fit of anger and scorn, knocks away the glass from Lawyer Bonu's hand, and makes a push past him ... Lawyer Bonu recovers quickly and throws his arms round Mana'an, trying to kiss her ... she gets her teeth on Lawyer Bonu's hand and bites him hard ...) <sup>41</sup>

De Graft's major intentions in his portrayal of Mana'an are to discuss the question of a daughter's freedom in choosing her own career



and to demonstrate the respectability of female performing artists. Mana'an is caught between her father's authoritarian attitude and prejudice against female performing artists on the one hand and her boss's chauvinistic attitude towards his female employees as sex objects on the other. The heroine's resistance against sexual victimization even at the risk of losing a chance to pursue a course in dance-drama is, therefore, de Graft's statement, not only about the strength required by African professional women if they want to survive in a male-dominated world, it is also an attempt to demolish the prejudice prevalent in contemporary Africa that actresses are women of loose sexual morals.

It is unfortunate that none of the playwrights basing their works on the plight of professional African women have examined the situation of those women who occupy positions of authority such as managerial and administrative posts where they are superior to men. Such women have problems emanating from the fact that their jobs are a reversal of a woman's traditional position as a subordinate helper of the man. Indeed, it may be that playwrights examined here have ignored the senior female professional because, being male and in spite of their sympathies for women, they subconsciously hold a traditional attitude towards women and therefore the female official who is superior to men does not automatically come to their minds.

This chapter has discussed selected playwrights' representation of the urban African woman. The chapter has attempted to show how chauvinism and prejudice have contributed to situations whereby

playwrights project distorted images of women and highlight existing prejudices against women. It has been observed also how some playwrights, though male, manifest tremendous sensitivity to the plight of the urban woman.

One limitation of this chapter which cannot go unmentioned is that, owing to our dependence on the availability of materials, it relies exclusively on male playwrights. This limitation hinders the discussion from incorporating comparative remarks on the portrayal of women by male playwrights and that by the female writers. Our awareness of this regrettable omission is reflected in Chapters 4 and 5 where we draw as many comparisons as possible between the major male playwrights and their female counterparts, respectively.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

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- 3 'Segun Ajibade, Rakinyo, in African Plays for Playing 1, op.cit. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 4 Op.cit., pp.81-82.
- 5 Op.cit.
- 6 Note the dictionary definition of Jezebel: a wicked, impudent or abandoned woman. Oxford English Dictionary, Vol.V. H-K, p.579.
- 7 Op.cit., p.113.
- 8 Ime Ikiddeh, Blind Cyclos, in Ten One-Act Plays (ed.) by Cosmo Pieterse, London: Heinemann, 1968, pp.109-133. All references and quotations are from this edition.
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- 10 Op.cit., p.124.
- 11 Op.cit.
- 12 Op.cit.
- 13 David Mulwa, Eyes of Judgement, unpublished play, Nairobi, 1985.
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- 15 Op.cit., p.28.
- 16 Ibid., p.36, italics mine.



- 17 Op.cit.
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- 19 Innocent Banda, Lord Have Mercy in Nine Malawian Plays (ed.) by James Gibbs. Limbe and Lilongwe, Popular Publications and Likuni Press & Publishing House, 1976, pp.101-117. All references and quotations are from this edition.
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- 21 Op.cit., pp.124-125.
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- 27 Op.cit., p.102.
- 28 Op.cit.
- 29 Ebrahim Hussein, Wakati Ukuta (Time is a Wall), in Michezo ya Kuigiza, by Ebrahim Hussein, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1970.
- 30 Efua Sutherland, Foriwa, Accra, State Publishing Corporation, 1967. For detailed analysis of this play, see Chapter 5.
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- 32 Op.cit.
- 33 Francis Kamau, The Positive Volunteers, in The Debtors (ed.) by Chris Wanjala, Nairobi, East African Literature Bureau, 1977, pp.121-145. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 34 Jean Pliya, La secrétaire particulière, Yaounde: Editions Clé, 1973. All references and quotations are from this edition.

- 35 Joe de Graft, Sons and Daughters, London: OUP, 1964; 1979 reprint.  
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- 36 Op.cit., p.92 (italics in the script).
- 37 Op.cit., p.128.
- 38 Op.cit., p.54.
- 39 Ibid., pp.76-77.
- 40 Op.cit.
- 41 Ibid., pp.37-38.

## CHAPTER 3

### WOMEN IN POLITICS

The intention of this chapter is to examine the representation by selected African playwrights of women's role in politics. The relevance of this discussion lies in the centrality of politics in African creative writing. Politics permeates all genres of African literature. The explanation for this is found in the fact that Africa has been the arena of political drama for many years, especially after her contact with the West. Louis James emphasizes the crucial relationship between politics and literature in Africa when he makes the following observation:

In situations as explosive as that of Africa today there can be no creative literature that is not in some way protest, in some way political. Even the writer who opts out of the social struggles of his country and tries to create a private world of art, is saying something controversial about the responsibility of the artist to society. If he tries to create his private world by drawing on, say, the artistic achievement of Europe, he is saying something very controversial indeed.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the popular myth in Africa that women's participation in the affairs of their societies is confined to the kitchen and other stereotyped feminine roles, African women have contributed very significantly to the political advancement of their societies in both the traditional and contemporary periods. However, in their



participation in politics, these women have had to contend with many problems arising from discrimination by virtue of their sex. As will be seen below, in the traditional setting, there is a tendency to use women as scapegoats when there are natural or political catastrophes. In both the traditional and the contemporary era, political leadership is regarded as a sphere exclusively for men and therefore women have had to work extra hard in order to gain access to or prove their capability in this field.

This chapter is divided into three main parts, viz., The Traditional Scene, The Contemporary Scene and The South African Scene. The Traditional Scene includes the political affairs of African societies before contact with the West while the Contemporary Scene incorporates the colonial phase and the independence period. The South African Scene looks at how the apartheid political system affects the position of the black South African woman.

### The Traditional Scene

In looking at the traditional scene, it should be noted that here, religion cannot be divorced from politics. This is because traditional political institutions were seen as intermediaries between the human and the supernatural worlds. Traditional rulers took advantage of this situation and used religion as an arm of their political power.

This section is divided into three parts. 'The Role of Women as Sacrificial Victims' examines the plight of women in situations where

a community needs a human sacrificial victim to placate the gods in time of catastrophe or during a particular ritual. The part also includes the role of women as scapegoats in political conflicts. The second part looks at the plight of women as wives of political leaders while the third examines the representation of women as political leaders.

#### The Role of Women as Sacrificial Victims

Grace Ogot (F) Kenya	)	<u>Oganda's Journey</u> ?1968
E. Mphahlele (M) South Africa	)	
J.E. Henshaw (M) Nigeria:		<u>Companion for a Chief</u> 1964
Ochieng'-Konyango (M) Kenya:		<u>There Were Strings on Magere's Shield</u> 1977

The need for human scapegoats to be sacrificed in order to avert catastrophes is an important part of traditional African politics. This need arose normally in time of natural catastrophes such as droughts and famines and also in time of social disasters such as wars. As it was difficult to find a voluntary sacrificial victim, African traditional political institutions had their own system of choosing who should be sacrificed. In most cases this tragic role was played by those who occupied a weak social position in a community, for example, the foreigners, the idiots and the women.

In societies where women were considered as unclean and unfit to come in close proximity with the gods (and many African communities regarded women as such) it seems contradictory and ironical that a woman should play the role of sacrificial victim, particularly in sacred rituals.

However, to cover up this contradiction and also to camouflage the fact that women were victimized because of their weak socio-political positions, there were mechanisms used in the choice of a woman in order to appease the gods and have them release the rains.<sup>2</sup> In such a case it was explained that the best gift which could be given to the gods was a beautiful virgin girl from the community which was suffering from the drought. Oganda's Journey<sup>3</sup> by Grace Ogot and E'ski Mphahlele is based on this custom. In this play, the writers question the choice of an innocent girl as a sacrificial victim to avert a serious drought.

Oganda is presented as a victim of men's political ambitions and of the chauvinistic attitude towards women as sex objects. Nditi, the medicineman, interprets the will of the gods and the ancestors from his own view of women. He transfers his own attitude of women as sex objects to the ancestors and imagines that the best way to placate the latter would be for the chief among these fore-fathers to sleep with the most beautiful virgin in the land. Listen to the voice Nditi imagines hearing from the spirits of the ancestors:

Your dream last night has truth in it. Oganda, daughter of Labong'o your Chief and master, is the most beautiful prize you can give to the ancestors so that this thirsty land may have rain. The drought has gone on too long, and greater disasters will befall you if the anger of Podho and your other ancestors is not appeased ... Oganda must go to the lake where your ancestors live. She must walk in and the currents will carry her into the arms of Podho in the deeps.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of appeasing the gods and the ancestors through having Podho sleep with Oganda is all in the mind of Nditi as a man who uses his own perception of women to interpret the will of the divine powers.



It is no wonder then he does not give a thought to the effect his choice will have on Oganda or on the young girl's mother. Nditi's concern is only on the effect his choice will have on his future political connections with the chief. There is an implication in the play that Nditi's decision is triggered off by a quarrel he has had with the chief recently. There is also an implication that the medicineman hopes the chief will take it as an honour that his daughter has been chosen by the gods, and therefore this kind of interpretation may serve to cement their future political relations. This is a clear illustration of how women are used as political pawns in men's political ambitions.

It is the chorus of women in Oganda's Journey who, like the chief wife in Henshaw's Children of the Goddess<sup>5</sup>, know this unfortunate position of women in men's political ambitions. And Nditi hates the chorus of women because of this very reason that they can see through his intrigues. The lament of the chorus is an indication that Oganda's tragedy is not an unusual experience in the history of women in this community, but it is one of those common events which are typical of life in societies where women have no political voice. The chorus identify Oganda's tragedy as their own:

What have we done  
that the gods should  
skin us alive like this?  
Nditi should tell us that!  
You are wise, or so they say, Nditi ...  
We the women of the earth bear children,  
break and bend our backs under the load,  
and when the new dawn comes,

we take our place again  
 in the ancient pattern of things.  
 Life is pain, life is fate,  
 yours /Ndití/ is only that which you have eaten,  
 and sits in safety in your belly.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to sacrifice Oganda is made by the men without consulting even Oganda's mother; the latter is only informed when the decision has already been ~~taken~~. On the communal level, people rejoice that someone will die for them and that they will have rain; but on the individual level, it is an agonizing experience for Oganda and her mother. It is significant that only the chorus of women sympathize with Oganda's mother. As women, the chorus must have had similar experiences to that which has fallen on Oganda's mother and therefore they can easily empathize with her:

Who will cry the loudest?  
 Again it is the woman who must wail  
 into the long and lonely wilderness of time -  
 Oganda's mother: if it shall be you,  
 you need a stone to swallow ...  
 we are mothers too, our Mother:  
 we have fed the soil with corpses from our bowels ...  
 The gods shall ask for blood  
 and we must give it.<sup>7</sup>

In this chant, there is an implication that women's suffering is a result of collusion between men and the gods. In Henshaw's Companion for a Chief<sup>8</sup> this collusion is dramatized showing how the gods demand sacrifice without naming anyone; but a man uses his power to victimize a woman he wanted to get as a wife but failed.

The community on which Henshaw bases his play practises a tradition whereby the burial of a chief requires the death of one of his subjects to accompany him on his journey to the world of the

ancestors. The victim is expected to be food for the gods to placate them and hence ensure that they offer the deceased chief his rightful place among the ancestors. Here, there is no rule that the sacrificial victim has to be a woman but the High Priest uses his powerful political position as a means of revenge and it is an innocent woman he chooses as the target for his revenge.

Adeigra is chosen as a sacrificial victim owing to quarrels rooted in past relationships and in which she had no part to play. Tubaru, the High Priest, wanted to marry Adeigra but her parents refused to give her to him. (Her consent or refusal was of no consequence since this was to be an arranged marriage.) The second reason why Tubaru victimizes Adeigra was a political grudge involving the High Priest's grandfather and Adeigra's husband's grandfather; the latter refused to participate in corrupt politics to enable Tubaru's grandfather to buy himself a place in the secret society. Adeigra had no part to play in these politics; she was not even married to the man whose grandfather is involved here. This is therefore an obvious case of victimization.

As in the case of Oganda in Oganda's Journey, negative attitudes towards women are a contributory factor to Adeigra's victimization. Apart from personal grudges and dirty politics, the High Priest's treatment of Adeigra is motivated by his resentment of a woman who does not carry herself with the subservience expected from women in traditional Africa. Adeigra is dignified and proud. As the High Priest, Tubaru is one of the guardians of his community's culture and



hence he takes advantage of his position to get rid of people who behave as outsiders to their circumscribed positions. His resentment of Adeigra's pride and dignity is apparent from his exclamation after laying a trap for her:

Now great Chief of Boka, your road is prepared. You hungry spirits that molest us with your anger, be now calmed, for in this kingdom there is no head so graceful and proud as that of Adeigra, wife of Suoma. Tonight she will become the companion for our Chief and the food for our gods.<sup>9</sup>

Henshaw's treatment of the issue of traditional politics and his portrayal of Adeigra show his sympathies for women. The playwright contrasts this woman and the High Priest making her emerge as intelligent and admirable where her assailant appears stupid and detestable. Adeigra uses her intelligence to weave a clever coup de théâtre, designing a trick in which she reverses roles with Tubaru and sends him as the sacrificial victim to accompany his chief to the land of the ancestors. The means Adeigra uses to save herself and her family from dirty intrigues reveals that women's survival in the face of traditional African politics depends on their determination to rebel against traditional attitudes which classify them as weaklings and their willingness to face difficult situations with an open mind.

Although the Chief's daughter in Ochieng'-Konyango's There Were Strings on Magere's Shield<sup>10</sup> is not used as a sacrificial victim in the politico-religious sense as in the case of Oganda in Oganda's Journey, her plight ~~to~~ a political scapegoat illustrates similar attitudes towards women as those behind the fate of Oganda and Adeigra.

The Chief's daughter is used as a scapegoat in the political

conflict between her people and a rival neighbouring ethnic group. She is the 'string' expressed in the title of the play tied to spy on Magere, the great warrior of the rival community. She is married off to a man who is old enough to be her father, a man she has never met, and worst of all, her people's enemy. As in the case of Oganda, her safety is not considered in the decision. She is chosen by virtue of her beauty and her prestigious position as the Chief's daughter; her physical features are used to tantalize Magere and make him reveal the root of his strength.

The attitude taken by the men as they send off this girl is important as it reflects an important aspect of the position of women in African politics both in the traditional scene and the contemporary. Women are often used as commodities to further men's political ambitions. The Chief reveals this when he rationalizes his decision to send his daughter on this mission. He tells his wife:

You either lose her partly or I lose my position and all our people lose their place in the world ... The weight of the head of an elephant is only felt by the elephant. To maintain ourselves as we are we must carry the weight - we must sacrifice something.<sup>11</sup>

Notice a similar attitude in Dauda in Easmon's Dear Parent and Ogre<sup>12</sup> when he tries to marry off his daughter to a possible practical ally. Notice also the similarity between the Wiseman's chauvinistic attitude towards women in There Were Strings on Magere's Shield and that of the Medicineman in Oganda's Journey. He says:

What makes women is what is already beautiful. What size her waist is or her arms are not the important thing. That who made women made all of them beautiful. (Grinning) Only one

part is important to a young husband ...<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned elsewhere in this study, people like the Medicineman, the High Priest, and Wiseman in Oganda's Journey, Children of the Goddess, and There Were Strings on Magere's Shield, respectively, are guardians of their communities' values. It would follow then that their chauvinistic attitudes towards women reflect the way in which women are treated in these communities. The traditional view of women as sex objects reduces their human value and makes it natural for them to be misused for political reasons as illustrated in the three plays examined above.

#### The Role of Women as Wives of Leaders

Austin Bukenya (M) Uganda:	<u>The Secret</u> 1968
J.E. Henshaw (M) Nigeria:	<u>Children of the Goddess</u> 1964
Aloys Odhiambo (M) Kenya:	<u>Odanga's Flower</u> 1982
Ochieng'-Konyango (M) Kenya:	<u>There Were Strings on Magere's Shield</u> 1977
Tom Omara (M) Uganda:	<u>The Exodus</u> 1968

The role of women in marital relationships was discussed under various sections in Chapter 1. It was observed here that traditional practices and beliefs favoured men and subsequently undermined the position of women.

This section discusses the plight of women as wives of men occupying positions of leadership in the traditional setting. Contrary to popular expectation, the position of wives of leaders is more



difficult and more demanding than that of wives of ordinary men. There are three major reasons for this. The first reason is that the dual role of wife and subject which the wife of a ruler plays is not clearly defined. The second reason is that, rather than give them an opportunity to contribute freely to the political affairs of their communities, these women's proximity to power merely facilitates a situation whereby they can be victimized when things go wrong. Lastly, owing to the fact that rulers have the prerogative to marry any woman in their land, wives of rulers find themselves sharing their husband with too many other women and in this situation they are treated as commodities, sometimes to an unbearable degree.

Austin Bukenya's The Secret<sup>14</sup> examines the effects of the Baganda kings' prerogative to exploit the tradition of polygamy to extremes. Among the Baganda of Uganda, besides the wives a king chose for himself, he could get numerous others as part of the booty after winning a war or as 'presents' from various subjects. For example, it was an established traditional practice for all chiefs in the kingdom to present a newly crowned king with young beautiful maidens. The unfortunate thing is that not all these women attained the status of wife. The king had the prerogative to grant or deny a woman this status, just as he had the right to acquire someone else's wife as a concubine. The women owned by the king who did not attain the status of wife were regarded as maids or concubines and had very limited rights. It does not mean, however, that the attainment of the status of wife improved on a woman's situation as far as conjugal relations

with the king were concerned. What it entailed was that as a wife a woman could be used for political purposes whereby she could be given a chieftdom to guard on behalf of the king.

Like all traditional rulers, a Muganda king could manipulate tradition; he could, if he wished, treat a wife as a concubine or give a concubine the rights due to a wife. The character Nannono in The Secret, for example, is a concubine and not a wife. Yet she is King Nakibinge's favourite and is given the power to rule if the king dies in battle. This is exactly what happened in the case of the historical Nannono on whose experiences Bukenya bases his heroine.

Bukenya's major interest in The Secret is the way in which a king's marital privileges affect his relations with his subjects and the neighbouring people. The playwright views these privileges as the direct cause of so much involvement in war. The easy acquisition of wives and concubines leads King Nakibinge to regard these women as cheap commodities rather than human beings. Subsequently he extends this attitude to his subjects and the neighbouring communities whereby he sees the former as mere tools to fight in his wars and the latter as fodder through whose deaths he can gain political fame.

It is this proposition for which the relationship between King Nakibinge and his maid or concubine Nannono is used. As a result of being forced to concentrate on one woman, the king now sees marriage in a different light. He has found true companionship and this is to a great extent responsible for his reluctance to continue with the war. He confides in his sister:

With twenty wives, I thought I had too few. Then I got disillusioned: I've found much more joy with only one, Nannono, my little maid. The months I have spent with her in this wilderness have been the happiest of all my life. But now bitterness comes again: I have to fight - and plunge again into that herd of my wives, and forget my joy, sacrifice it to petty bodily pleasures.<sup>15</sup>

Although implicitly Bukenya recognizes that marital privileges of traditional rulers create a situation where wives of royal households are regarded en masse and treated as commodities, he is operating from a pure male viewpoint. The playwright's sympathies are more with the king than with the wives. He concentrates on the way in which the marital privileges of the king dehumanize him rather than on the effect of these privileges on the wives so acquired.

In Chapter 1 it was discussed how seriously traditional African communities regard the role of procreation for women and hence how unfortunate it is for a woman to be childless. Selected playwrights have shown that it is worse for wives of leaders. This is where the dual role of wives of leaders becomes problematic. Unlike modern power institutions, political power in traditional African settings is inherited and not acquired. Failure of a wife of a leader to produce children (particularly sons) is considered, not only as failure to satisfy communal expectations of the role of every adult married woman; it is also interpreted as a betrayal of her duty to provide political heirs. In Odanga's Flower<sup>16</sup> and Children of the Goddess<sup>17</sup> Aloys Odhiambo and J.E. Henshaw, respectively, examine the precarious situation of childless wives of leaders.

In spite of the prestigious position she occupies as the king's



wife, Anyango, in Odanga's Flower, leads a very miserable and lonely life due to her childlessness. She is a victim of contempt from the community and condemnation from the kings' advisers. Anyango loves children and children enjoy being in her company, but the women in her community scorn and mistrust her. They assume that, being childless, Anyango is ill-intentioned and therefore she might harm their children. This is not only from a common assumption that barren women harbour malevolent jealousy towards the productive, but also from an equally prevalent belief that these childless women are witches and contact with them is likely to lead to destructive consequences for those associating with them. It may be observed here in passing that the attitude of women in Anyango's community illustrates the way in which women are forced by conservative traditional beliefs to be destructive rather than supportive towards one another. Instead of empathizing with Anyango as a fellow woman who is a victim of those traditions which undermine the position of women, her female neighbours join the male society in victimizing their own kind.

Besides being scorned generally by the community, Anyango is condemned by the king's advisers as a subject who has failed to perform the important duty of producing a successor. The elders pressurize the king to discard his wife saying, 'Without a child to be king is baseless'.<sup>18</sup>

As they drive Anyango to suicide, the king's advisers consider her as a tool which has failed to play its role and not so much as a human being. This is the same attitude assumed by the Effiefom, priest

and king's adviser, in Henshaw's Children of the Goddess.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike the monogamous situation in Odanga's Flower, the question of producing an heir does not arise in Children of the Goddess, yet even here the childless king's wife experiences similar suffering to that of Anyango in the former play.

Asari Amansa is the last and the current favourite in the royal household. As in the case of Anyango, the king himself is reluctant to send Asari Amansa away but his adviser puts pressure on him. Like other religious right hand men of traditional rulers, the Effiefom is the guardian of this community's culture and so the interpretation of the childlessness of a wife in the royal household is his responsibility. Since the king already has possible heirs other reasons are used to cast away the childless. Notice the priest's adamant and inhuman attitude as he determines this woman's fate:

Asari Amansa! Asari Amansa! The goddess is not pleased with Asari Amansa. My Lord, do not harbour a woman with whom the goddess is displeased. Do not place yourself and this kingdom in enmity with the spirits of our fathers on which rest the good fortune and prosperity of our people. My Lord, send Amansa away.<sup>20</sup>

Asari Amansa is condemned as a witch just like Anyango in Odanga's Flower. She experiences great contempt from the young co-wives in the royal household but it is significant that she receives great sympathies from the king's chief wife. The latter's attitude towards Asari Amansa's situation is similar to that of the chorus of women towards Oganda's mother in Oganda's Journey.<sup>21</sup> The words she uses to plead for Asari Amansa express her sympathies for the young woman as well as her under-

standing of the plight of all wives of royal households:

Oh Effeom, you do not know what we women suffer. Asari Amansa has done all she can to bless our royal household with a child. Please, my Lord, leave her alone. Her time will surely come.<sup>22</sup>

Having lived in the royal household and in this culture for a long time, the chief wife must have witnessed many unpleasant experiences involving women and therefore she can speak with authority about the plight of any woman in the kingdom, particularly those in the royal household.

Women's political position is discussed in greater detail under 'The Role of Women as Political Leaders' but it is important to note the role of wives of rulers in political leadership since their proximity to power has obviously some effect on them. Wives of political leaders in the traditional context have negligible political power, in spite of their proximity to power. This is because, as observed above, they are victims of chauvinistic attitudes just like all other women. However, one significant point raised by playwrights who support women's participation in politics is that if women were taken more seriously their political contributions would help avert disasters. This is implied, for example, in the presentation of Mikayi in Ochieng'-Komyango's There Were Strings on Magere's Shield<sup>23</sup> and Lawino in Tom Omara's The Exodus.<sup>24</sup>

Mikayi is portrayed as ~~more~~ <sup>more</sup> ~~farsighted~~ <sup>farsighted</sup> than her husband, the great warrior Magere, and all his male advisers. She can see that the offer of a bride by their rival neighbouring community is a political



trick through which the enemy wants to learn the great warrior's prowess in war, but her warning is dismissed as motivated by jealousy. Even after the bride has already learnt the secret and is on her way to reveal it to her people, Mikayi is still not taken seriously. Notice Magere's reaction: 'I thought you had now rid yourself of this jealousy ... I don't like women talking to me like this'.<sup>25</sup>

The underlying motif and the major theme of The Exodus is the drama of the mythical conflicts between the two great ancestors of the Luo people of Eastern Africa which led to these people's political disintegration from a unified society into rival communities. The presentation of Lawino, wife of one of the ancestors, shows the author's conviction that if women's political participation was allowed, this disintegration would have been avoided.

Lawino has no right to touch on political matters even on behalf of her husband when the latter is away. Her position as a woman is expressed in her response to Gipir, the second ancestor, when the latter comes to borrow his brother Labongo's ancestral spear. She says:

I have no ruling over the spear of Labongo.  
He is your brother and I am nothing  
But a woman, a wife to him.<sup>26</sup>

Although Lawino is not allowed to participate in political matters, it is interesting to note how easily she is blamed when things go wrong, in this case, when Gipir loses the ancestral spear. Notice Labongo's chauvinistic attitude towards women which he uses to back up his claims that Lawino gave away his ancestral spear:

Lawino:           But Labongo, a replacement ...

Labongo:           What? Replacement?  
                       You have been lured into giving him my  
                       spear  
                       You woman, with rhythm.

Gipir:             I have not lain with her.

Labongo:           How do I know you did not?  
                       What other act is so sweet as to move  
                       a woman  
                       Into giving away a sacred possession?

Lawino:            You bring shame on me.<sup>27</sup>

Lawino's attempts to act as a peacemaker are rewarded with insults. Later in the play she has to bear the pain of watching her innocent baby slaughtered by her husband in order to retrieve his brother's precious stone from the baby's stomach and prove that he is a man. The playwright satirizes the two men, for example, in the scene where they perform the oath of separation ceremony with great enthusiasm and flourish in complete oblivion to Lawino's weeping after the slaughtering of her baby. Notice this from the stage directions:

LAWINO is weeping; OTEKA leans against her, also crying.  
LABONGO and GIPIR swing round simultaneously, back to back,  
their spears rasping apart, and exit in opposite directions ...<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the play, Lawino's character is contrasted with that of the men; where the men are for competition and conflict the woman is for peace and love. Lawino cares for healthy family relationships at the risk of losing her name as a chaste woman. The two brothers, on the other hand, put family ties and welfare secondary to political ambitions. This contrast illustrates the playwright's view that if women were allowed to participate in the political affairs of their societies their contribution would go a long way in preventing disasters. The representation of women in political leadership is

discussed in greater detail below.

The Role of Women as Political Leaders

Nyambura Mpesha (F) Kenya: The Happening 1981

Zegoua (Charles) Nokan (M) Ivory Coast:  
Abraha Poukou ou Une Grande Africaine 1972

Isaac Waweru (M) Kenya: The End of the Road 1982

In the traditional as well as the contemporary periods, chauvinistic attitudes in Africa have led to a situation whereby leadership for women is considered unnatural. The most prevalent attitude is that women are emotional and weak; therefore they cannot cope with the challenging positions of leadership which require rational judgement and strength of character. Playwrights who subscribe to the view that it is unnatural for women to govern represent female leaders as despotic and extremely hostile towards their male subjects. In contrast, playwrights who represent women's potential to govern portray female characters in positions of leadership as just, selfless and extremely altruistic towards the people they govern.

The attitude that it is unnatural for women to govern is projected by Isaac Waweru and Nyambura Mpesha in The End of the Road<sup>29</sup> and The Happening<sup>30</sup>, respectively. In contrast to these two plays is Zegoua (Charles) Nokan's Abraha Poukou ou Une Grande Africaine<sup>31</sup> in which a woman's rule is respected and therefore depicted as rooted in the desire to work for the welfare of the society on the part of the



female ruler.

Both The End of the Road and The Happening are based on the Kenyan legend about a Gikuyu woman ruler named Wangu wa Makeri. In the legend, the reign of Wangu is said to have been the chaotic end of matriarchy and the beginning of patrilineal rule among the Gikuyu. Neither of the two playwrights supports women's leadership.

Right at the beginning Waweru states clearly that the aim of his play is to demonstrate that women's leadership is unacceptable. He states his aim thus:

The play tries to clearly show how bad the rule of women would be if it were there in Gikuyu land and how soon men would get dissatisfied by it and therefore plan a revolt under all costs.<sup>32</sup>

In both plays, Wangu is presented as a despot and as a grotesque megalomaniac. She is shown to suffer from a superiority complex vis-à-vis men, an attitude which makes her relate with extreme hostility towards her male subjects. Her aim in leadership is not to be of service to her people but to prove that she is stronger than men. In The End of the Road she sums up her position thus:

They call me a woman ... Yes, a woman yet I am greater than all men in this land. There across and beyond Kagucwi and Gaturi Hills live men. Up there on the slopes of Nyandarua lives the great paramount Chief. On the other side of Ruare are the others. Yet there is not any of these who is greater than I am. There they have cages of women, here I have a harem of men. Great, great is Wangu ... See the way they come, the way they bow at great Wangu. Who can challenge the power of this great woman?<sup>33</sup>

Wangu is presented as corrupt. She demands not only homage from those she governs but also material gains. She will not attend to any

matters affecting the community before she is paid. She is shown to live in an ivory tower, completely alienated from everybody she rules, including her husband.

Mpesha's Wangu in The Happening is more developed than Waweru's Wangu in The End of the Road. But this development only adds more negative qualities on the character as a representation of women political leaders. Mpesha's heroine is abnormally ambitious and she is concerned with her own political image at the expense of the community. Whereas in The End of the Road it is only men who complain about the women's leadership, in The Happening women are equally dissatisfied with Wangu's rule. Both men and women in the latter play, for example, complain about the way in which she gloats in gaining political fame through waging war on neighbouring communities, yet she does not participate in the actual fighting herself. A difference can be detected here between the portrayal of women in plays which support women's leadership and those which do not. In plays such as The Trial of Dedan Kimathi<sup>34</sup> by Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Mukwava wa Uhehe<sup>35</sup> (Mukwava of Uhehe) by Mugyabuso Mulokozi women are presented as capable of engaging in actual fighting. Secondly in the latter plays women are involved in struggles for a good cause, that is, for the liberation of their countries and not for sheer political fame as in the case of Wangu in The Happening.

In The Happening there is no attempt to correct myths which build around women who distinguish themselves in roles outside the stereotypes. For example, Wangu's despotism leads her subjects into accusing

her of practising witchcraft and also viewing her as a sub-human being. Like Anowa in Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa<sup>36</sup> she is said to have origins which are outside the normal human experience. But whereas Aidoo presents ~~her~~ heroine in such a way that the audience is aware of her criticism against such chauvinistic attitudes towards strong women, Mpesha gives the impression that she goes along with those characters in her play who resent women's strength. Her comparison of Wangu and an Ogress, for instance, deserves scrutiny. To get the full implication of this comparison one needs to know what the Ogre character represents in African story-telling tradition. The Ogre is conceived of as a grotesque half-human half-animal monster which symbolises inhumanity and the power of evil and destruction lurking in the world. If the presentation of Wangu as an Ogress is deliberate on Mpesha's part, then the playwright is subscribing to the erroneous theory that the pursuit of political power by a woman leads her into losing not only her femininity but also her very humanity.

Mpesha's representation of women political leaders in this negative light is shocking considering that this playwright is a woman. A woman author would be expected to be supportive towards women and therefore use anti-feminist legends and myths such as the story of Wangu wa Makeri only with the intention of correcting the distorted image of women. Mpesha is a university lecturer in Literature and her major area of interest is African oral literature. Perhaps her only intention in writing The Happening was to see how material from the oral tradition can be used in creative writing and she did not consider the need to



examine the thematic significance of her work. The other reason could be that unlike major playwrights like Ama Ata Aidoo Mpesha had not developed an ideological stand by the time she wrote her play.

Unlike Waweru and Mpesha, Zegoua Nokan is overtly supportive of women's political leadership. Like these two playwrights, Nokan bases his play, Abraha Poukou, on a legend but his initial departure from the direction of his counterparts is his choice of a legend in which women's leadership is respected. Nokan then goes on to give a very positive interpretation to this legend.

Abraha Poukou is based on a feudal society in which the nobility thrives at the expense of slaves. Abraha Poukou is herself a member of the ruling class, being the daughter of the ruler. Yet, right from her youth, Abraha Poukou has always detested the exploitation of human beings by other human beings. As a youth and as a female, she does not have much right to express her opinions to the elders, but the desire to oppose exploitation is so great that she decides to ignore cultural etiquette and speak. She tells the whole group of ruling elders:

Les esclaves nourrissent les nobles. Les premiers travaillent pendant que les seconds se livrent au vice. Ceux-là valent donc mieux que ceux-ci. La guerre et la famine ont respectivement permis à nos ancêtres de faire des prisonniers et de troquer de l'or ou des ignames contre des personnes. Cela ne nous autorise pas à les humilier.<sup>37</sup>

This speech is Abraha Poukou's début in the play. The words express the young woman's ideological stand as far as the politics of her people is concerned, and sets the steps of her subsequent actions in the play.

It is her hatred of exploitation and corrupt politics which leads Abraha Poukou into rebelling against her cousin's régime. She decides to leave her privileges of a noble woman in pursuit of a just world for those slaves who are prepared to struggle for their freedom. She reiterates her sentiments against exploitation and her love of justice which is to be her guiding principle henceforth. It is important to note her conviction that as a woman she ought to fight for liberation side by side with slaves because the lot of women in her society is as underprivileged as that of slaves:

Dans notre société, les conditions d'existence des femmes ne sont pas très différentes de celles des esclaves. Nous devons donc lutter pour la même cause ... Depuis mon enfance, je pense que l'esclavage ne doit pas exister, qu'il ne faut pas que des hommes exploitent leurs semblables. M'efforçant de mettre en pratique ces idées, je bute contre maints obstacles.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike Wangu in The End of the Road and The Happening, Abraha Poukou's major objective in leadership is not to attain personal grandeur. Hers is a commitment to a principle and to those who are down-trodden. This is why she opts to be regarded as a sister rather than a mother by the slaves she leads. It is for the same reason that she refuses to follow the traditional feudal methods of succession whereby her son would automatically become the next leader of the new-found community. She uses the vote and supports the son of a slave instead of her own son. This is not because she hates her son but because she has observed that the latter is reactionary and egoistic. She fears therefore that if he is allowed to succeed her, he may undermine the present liberation of the slaves and destroy her aspirations

for their future, that is, a return to their motherland as free men and women.

One of the myths used to bar women from positions of political leadership and other posts of public responsibility is that they are unable to synchronize their feminine roles such as motherhood with the demands of public responsibilities. It is often theorized that women cannot make up their minds about which position to take when a conflict arises between the two roles. Nokan uses a very moving incident to crush this myth. This is the incident when Abraha Poukou's baby dies during the trek; she is greatly upset, of course, by this death. But contrary to prejudiced expectations she does not give up her mission. With remarkable strength she wipes her tears and tells those she leads, 'Reprenons le chemin'.<sup>39</sup> And it is in recognition of the depth of Abraha Poukou's commitment to their liberation that the freed slaves decide to name their new-found nation, 'Baoulé', which means, 'the child is dead'. The symbolic significance of this incident in the thematic context of the play is that Abraha Poukou sacrifices her baby for the liberation of the slaves and for the establishment of justice where there has been great injustice.

Unlike Waweru and Mpesha, therefore, Nokan is all out to demonstrate that African women have contributed and are capable of contributing to the political health of their societies. The very title of the play, Abraha Poukou ou Une Grande Africaine, immediately indicates Nokan's respect for women political leaders. It would be a great omission not to note the sharp contrast between the poem Nokan



gives at the beginning of his play and Waweru's foreword quoted above. The poem is a kind of praise song to women for their political contributions. It reads:

Aux Africaines

Femmes africaines  
vous étiez à Dimbokro et Bassam,  
vous étiez dans le djebel;  
demain vous devez vous trouver avec nous ailleurs.  
Notre bataille débouchera sur la victoire totale des peuples.  
Femmes africaines  
ressemblez à vos soeurs de Viet-Nam.  
Je vous salue, femmes héroïques du monde entier.<sup>40</sup>

The Contemporary Scene

The second part of this chapter examines the representation of the participation of women in politics in the contemporary era. The discussion centres around the two significant historical phases of African politics since her contact with the West, viz., Struggles against Colonialism and Nation Building after the attainment of independence.

The Role of Women in Struggles against Colonialism

Emmanuel Mbogo (M) Tanzania: Tone la Mwisho (The last drop)  
1981

Mugyabuso Mulokozi (M) Tanzania:  
Mukwava wa Uhehe (Mukwava of  
Uhehe) 1979

Kenneth Watene (M) Kenya: Dedan Kimathi 1974

In many parts of Africa, women have played and continue to play

very significant roles in the wars against colonial domination. Their contribution has been in both the struggles against the encroachment of the coloniser on the African continent and in the wars for political independence from colonialism. In these struggles women have fought alongside the men, not as substitutes or inferior supporters, but in their own right as citizens of their various countries. This was the observation, for example, of Frantz Fanon on women's participation in the Algerian war for political independence from the French in the late 40s and early 50s. These Muslim women displayed great strength and commitment in defence of their country, breaking the barriers which had hitherto confined them away from the public eye and using their veils for a different purpose from that for which they were originally designed. In A Dying Colonialism<sup>41</sup> Fanon comments:

But involving the women was not solely a response to the desire to mobilize the entire nation. The women's entry into the war had to be harmonized with respect for the revolutionary nature of the war. In other words the women had to show as much spirit of sacrifice as the men. It was therefore necessary to have the same confidence in them as was required from seasoned militants who had served prison sentences. A moral elevation and a strength of character that were altogether exceptional would therefore be required of the women ... The women could not be conceived of as a replacement product, but as an element capable of adequately meeting the new tasks.<sup>42</sup>

In former British colonies as well, for example Kenya, women contributed in the actual fighting as well as in the sense of giving psychological support to the fighters and to those who were left at home.

There are two conflicting positions taken by playwrights who have

dealt with the role of women in liberation struggles. The first position is that of playwrights who see women in their stereotyped roles. This kind of stand blurs the playwrights' vision from recognizing women's contribution to liberation struggles in its proper perspective. The playwrights in this category represent women as playing the role of sex objects for the male freedom fighters and also as engaging in activities which undermine the efforts and the success of the freedom fighters. This is the kind of representation Kenneth Watene gives women in Dedan Kimathi.<sup>43</sup> The second position is that taken by those playwrights who recognize women's contribution as true freedom fighters and therefore depict their participation with a great deal of respect and admiration. These writers are represented by Mugyabuso Mulokozi and Emmanuel Mbogo in Mukwava wa Uhehe<sup>44</sup> (Mukwava of Uhehe) and Tone la Mwisho<sup>45</sup> (The last drop), respectively.

In Dedan Kimathi, Kenneth Watene distorts the image of women fighters and misrepresents their participation in the Kenyan war for political independence (otherwise known as the Mau Mau Movement). This playwright represents women from a totally male chauvinistic point of view. In his play, the women characters who live with the freedom fighters in the forest are there, not as fighters but as sex objects who have their own selfish motives while interacting with the freedom fighters. They neither understand the importance of the struggle nor do they care for its success. When their selfish ends are not met, they will not stop at anything to betray the struggle.

Lucia, one of the two characters who represent women in Dedan



Kimathi, is portrayed as a jealous, frustrated and angry woman. Her aim in being in the forest is to lure Kimathi, the Mau Mau leader, into marrying her. She does not understand what the war is all about and in fact, she sees Kimathi's commitment to it as an impediment to her personal interests. She is jealous of Wahu, the second woman in the forest, as she fears she may win Kimathi's love and thwart her intentions. In one of her emotional outbursts Lucia wonders why she should contribute to the struggle at all if she will not succeed in getting Kimathi. She exclaims: 'He will never marry me, / So why should I care?'<sup>46</sup>

Wahu's motive in being in the forest is the same as that of Lucia. She wants to possess Kimathi and prevent other women from winning his love. She is completely uncommitted to the struggle; her own personal survival is more important than the success of her people. She indicates this when she says, 'My life is more precious to me'.<sup>47</sup>

Through the two female characters, Watene presents women as uncommitted to revolutionary struggles; to him they are only useful as sex objects who can be easily manipulated by the male fighters. Wahu acts, not only as Kimathi's mistress, but also as a sex object for spying on the fighters under this general's command. While spying on the freedom fighters Wahu transforms herself into a double-dealer and in this role acts as a disruptive element to the struggle. As for Lucia, her jealousy for Wahu and her anger and frustration against Kimathi for denying her sexual attention leads her to lure the general away from the battle front and betray him to the colonial forces.

Notice here the representation of women as evil temptresses in this betrayal.

Watene's final conclusion on the role of women in the Kenyan struggle for political independence is that far from contributing to this war, they acted as disruptive elements by undermining the trust, unity and commitment of the male freedom fighters which were so necessary for the success of this struggle. This is a distorted view of women's participation in the Mau Mau Movement and it was no wonder that other Kenyan playwrights found the need to write a play to project the true picture. The Trial of Dedan Kimathi by Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o<sup>48</sup> was written as a response to the overall misrepresentation of the Mau Mau Movement which the playwrights observed in Dedan Kimathi. In Mugo's and Ngugi's play, as will be seen in Chapter 5, women played very significant roles in this war and their commitment as freedom fighters was as unconditional and unreserved as that of the men.

In sharp contrast to Watene's Dedan Kimathi are Mugyabuso Mulokozi's Mukwava wa Uhehe<sup>49</sup> and Emmanuel Mbogo's Tone la Mwisho<sup>50</sup> where women fighters are represented as committed and determined like any other true liberation fighter regardless of sex.

Mukwava wa Uhehe is based on a historical struggle which a renowned indigenous Tanzanian chief (Chief Mukwava of the Wahehe of the Southern highlands of Tanzania) led against the Germans at the onset of colonialism. Through his presentation of Mukwava's attitude towards women and his portrayal of women freedom fighters, Mulokozi shows his recognition of women's political contribution to Africa's liberation

struggles and thus puts women in their rightful place.

Mukwava is depicted as a leader who does not discriminate on sex lines when assigning roles of responsibility in the struggle. He castigates men who are not prepared to change their traditional attitudes and accept women's leadership. To him those who refuse women's leadership are living behind the times. He tells such traditionalists:

Bali yafaa ukumbuke kuwa huu ni wakati wa mabadiliko, mabadiliko makubwa sana. Na huu ni mwanzo tu, bado utaona makubwa zaidi ya kuamrisha na mwanamke.<sup>51</sup>

(It is important for you to remember that this is a time of change, great change. This is but the beginning, you are yet to witness greater changes than being led by women.)<sup>52</sup>

It is in this spirit that Mukwava appoints Mtage, a woman, as the overall leader of his army and respects the decisions she makes in mapping out the strategies to be utilized by the freedom fighters in the war.

Mtage herself is presented as a very courageous leader. One of her initial tasks is to establish her position among those men who are not prepared to be led by a woman. Such people she dismisses as cowards and she does not let their chauvinistic attitude distract her from her goal. She is also prepared to defend the capabilities of women in general. For example, when some old men assume they are complimenting her by calling her a man in a woman's skin, she retorts:

Mimi ni mwanamke katika ngozi ya mwanamke. Na nitabakia hivyo hivyo.<sup>53</sup>

(I am a woman in a woman's skin. And I shall remain thus forever.)



As a war general, Mtage is portrayed as a far-sighted, committed and brave leader. Many of the victories of the Wahehe against the Germans are attributed to her strategies in mobilising her fellow freedom fighters and to her determination to win in this bitter war. She is ready to lead the whole of the Wahehe community with their inferior weapons against the superior weapons of the Germans so long as victory is the goal. This determination is reflected in her words when she sends the community griot to announce to the people that everybody, men and women, must be prepared to fight.

But her participation in war has not drained Mtage of human feelings. She still retains her humanity and she can see when fighters overstep the boundaries of war and become beastly. This is apparent from an incident when she castigates the enemy soldiers for butchering an innocent baby to force its mother to give out the secrets of the freedom fighters. This is when Mtage is already a captive of the enemy and her fate is uncertain. Yet she is not afraid of fighting the enemy soldiers although her hands are bound, and she knows she could be annihilated with the gun any moment.

But it is important to note that Mtage is not portrayed as an individual woman with special qualities. Rather, she is presented as a symbolic character. She is the symbol of a future generation of women who are ready to break traditional barriers and fight alongside the men for the liberation of their communities. This is implied by the griot when he chants praise for her thus:

Wewe ndiwe mwanamke wa kesho,

Bila haya, bila woga, bila unyonge vitani au nyumbani.  
 Fahari yawanawake wote, fahari ya mtu mweusi.<sup>54</sup>

(You are the woman of the future,  
 Without shyness, fearless and strong, in battle and at home.  
 The pride of all women, the pride of black people.)

It is significant that these sentiments are expressed by the community griot. In African traditional political set-ups, the griot is not only the leader's mouthpiece but also the voice of the community. His recognition of women's contribution in the struggle for liberation therefore represents recognition by the leader as well as by the community at large.

A further point made in Mukwava wa Uhehe which is worth noting is that women's contribution in liberation struggles is not confined to a few women with special qualities of leadership. This is why besides Mtage the playwright gives examples of other women who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for the liberation of their community. One of these is the woman mentioned above who is not intimidated into betraying her people to the enemy, even after her baby has been slaughtered <sup>before</sup> ~~in~~ her very eyes and she too stands so close to the jaws of death through the enemy's gun.

Another woman loses her husband and all her male relatives in the war. Instead of leading her to despair and view the war with a hostile eye hereafter, her tragic experiences ignite her with the spirit of taking up arms and joining the struggle. Her dialogue with Mukwava when she approaches the latter to ask him to allow her to join the freedom fighters is too moving to ignore:

- Mwanamke: Hatukutazamia kuwa mambo yangukuwa mabaya hivi. Watu wamekufa wengi. Mume wangu na kaka zangu wote wamekufa.
- Mukwava: Pole, lakini usikate tamaa ...
- Mwanamke: Sijakata tamaa. Nilimuahidi mume wangu kuwa ikiwa angeanguka ningechukua nafasi yake kitaluni. Na sasa ameanguka nami nimeitimiza ahadi hiyo. Nitaendelea kupigania kile alichokifia.
- Mukwava: Maneno yako, mama, ni makubwa na ni mazuri.
- Mwanamke: Mutwa wangu, tusiposhinda sisi watashinda watoto wetu. Nikianguka mimi huyu mwanangu mgongoni atachukua nafasi yangu na vita vitaendelea.<sup>55</sup>
- (Woman: We did not foresee that things would be this bad. Many people have died. My husband and all my brothers are all dead.
- Mukwava: My condolences, but do not despair ...
- Woman: I have not despaired. I promised my husband that if he fell I would take his place in the struggle. And now that he has fallen I shall honour that promise. I shall continue to fight for the objective which my husband died for.
- Mukwava: Your words, mama\*, are important and are good.
- Woman: My leader, if we do not win ourselves, our children will attain victory. If I fall the baby I carry on my back will take my place and the struggle will continue.)

Notice the selflessness of the woman in her motives for joining the struggle as expressed in her last speech. She does not have the vested interests that the women in Dedan Kimathi have. On the whole, Mulokozi's depiction of women freedom fighters contrasts sharply with

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\* a term which literally means 'mother', but is used as a form of respectful address for women.



their representation by Kenneth Watere in the latter play. The portrayal of women freedom fighters in Mukwava wa Uhehe is paralleled by their treatment in E. Mbogo's Tone la Mwisho.

Tone la Mwisho is based on a more recent struggle in the history of colonial Africa. The play is based on the Zimbabwe people's wars of liberation from the Ian Smith régime. In this play, Mbogo underlines women's competence, endurance and sense of commitment in the liberation struggles of their countries. Like Mulokozi in Mukwava wa Uhehe, Mbogo is full of admiration for women's contribution to Africa's liberation from colonialism. His portrayal of Tsitsi, a woman captain in one of the Zimbabwean guerrilla movements against Ian Smith's régime, is very similar to Mulokozi's portrayal of Mtage.

Tsitsi is courageous and very committed to the struggle. She undergoes painful torture by the colonial forces but this neither makes her betray the secrets the enemy want to wrench from her, nor does it make her desert her comrades in the struggle. Although the torture leaves her physically weak, the experience makes her psychologically more determined to fight for her people's freedom. She is very clear about the goal for which she is fighting. For example, when persuaded to retire from the battlefield and nurse her health she says, 'Health means nothing to anyone who has no country ... A slave has no right to live ... In the struggle for liberation it is crucial for human beings to be prepared to lose everything - even their lives'.<sup>56</sup>

Tsitsi lives true to her words about a committed freedom fighter; she fights until the last drop of her blood, as she had earlier vowed.

Like Mtage in Mukwava wa Uhehe she becomes a symbol of the fighting spirit and commitment of her people. This is the implication of the ending of her eulogy:

Tutaukumbatia mzimu, wa Tsitsi mzalendo,  
Ila si kwa kulia chozi, wala kusema: yarabi!  
Bali kwa kujizatiti, kuzidisha mapambano.<sup>57</sup>

(We shall take Tsitsi's death  
The death of Tsitsi the freedom fighter,  
Not as a cause for tears or regrets,  
But as cause to amplify the struggle.)

#### The Role of Women in Post-independence Nation Building

The second section of our discussion on the contemporary scene focusses on the post-independence era. This period is the centre of most of the creative writing coming out of independent Africa today. Commenting on the importance of African creative writers' attention on post-independence African affairs, Chinua Achebe has the following to say:

Most of Africa is today politically free; there are thirty-six independent African states managing their own affairs - sometimes very badly. A new situation has thus arisen. One of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (sore as it is still) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not.<sup>58</sup>

Creative writing on the post-independence period is characterized by disillusionment with independence. The aspirations which led to rebellion and struggles against colonialism are seen to have been frustrated. It was expected that, for example, the oppression which was the order of the day during the colonial period would be replaced

by justice and concern for each other's welfare once African people took over the political leadership of their countries. This goal has not been attained. Independence and the progress which goes with it have been misinterpreted to mean acquisition of material wealth so that, instead of working together to build new nations which have people's welfare at the core, the situation is one where citizens work against one another in the race for money. Indeed greed for material wealth has become the order of the day in many walks of life in post-independence Africa.

African writers have responded to this situation with scathing attacks on their societies. They criticize the way in which vested interests rather than service to one's fellow-citizens dominate government officials' accession to power. They expose the exploitation and the corruption which have sprouted in many areas of public life. Human relations have been perverted in search of power and material wealth. The creative writers are especially bitter about the devaluation of human life which has resulted from obsession with wealth and power.

The overall concern of creative writers on the post-independence period is to help their societies correct the situation. They attempt to help their societies regain social values which can cure the present spiritual sterility and hence attain meaningful progress and true political liberation. These objectives of the African writer are articulated by Lubwa P'Chong, a contemporary Ugandan playwright, when he talks about what inspired him to write one of the plays examined in



this section.<sup>59</sup> He says:

I realized particularly after the fall of Amin that about ninety percent of Ugandans, their heads are not correct. This is why I wanted to point out in that play what is really wrong with us ... trying ... at the same time to bring back the suffering we went through in the past ... we artists have to go on hammering these things into the heads of people if people are going to change.<sup>60</sup>

This section is divided into three parts. 'The Role of Women in Parliamentary Elections and Political Power' discusses the plight of women in men's political ambitions in societies which still regard women as commodities. The second part, 'The Role of Women in Post-independence Materialistic Culture' examines the projection of the image of women in the post-independence race for accumulation of material wealth. The last part of this section examines the literary device whereby women are used as symbols of post-independence ideals.

The Role of Women in Parliamentary Elections and Political Power

R. Sarif Easmon (M) Sierra Leone:

Dear Parent and Ogre 1964

The New Patriots 1965

Ola Rotimi (M) Nigeria:

Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again  
1977

A recurrent theme in the plight of African women in this study is the attitude towards women as commodities. This attitude is discussed in detail in Chapter 1 in connection with various traditional practices affecting women. In the post-independence situation the attitude towards women as commodities is reflected in the way in which men put their political ambitions above the family welfare.

In Dear Parent and Ogre<sup>61</sup> and The New Patriots<sup>62</sup> Sarif Easmon

examines how men sacrifice their daughters' happiness in pursuit of political power and how young women are used as commodities in the power game. A different aspect of the way in which women are used as commodities in men's pursuit of political power is discussed in Ola Rotimi's Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again<sup>63</sup> where the playwright ridicules the use of women as bridges to reach the electorate in parliamentary elections.

In Dear Parent and Ogre Dauda wants to sacrifice his daughter Siata's happiness for his political ambitions. Dauda is the leader of the Opposition Party in a newly independent African country. He uses a dirty scheme to break his daughter's friendship with a man of her choice in order to marry her off to a man whom he sees as a potential political ally. The playwright's satirical attitude towards such politicians is illustrated in the following dialogue between the two politicians:

Mahmoud: Our two parties shall go fifty-fifty in both.

Dauda: And what about the swag after the kill?

Mahmoud: That's easy, Sir. (He sits on the edge of the settee, talking very vigorously.) We shall govern the country as a coalition. Whichever of our two parties wins the greater number of seats in the House shall provide the Prime Minister. In fact, bluntly - I shall be Premier and you Deputy, or vice versa ...

Dauda: Then let me be plain my boy. (Looks at his watch again.) I have an appointment in five minutes. But it can very well wait. Can you spare a quarter of an hour ...

(For once he seems to be at a loss for words.)

But once he's found his tongue he goes smoothly enough.)

Dauda: Er - er - I'm a parent first and foremost. I set my two children above any consideration in the world, Mahmoud. Briefly, then, it came to my ears that you cared for my daughter, Siata. (Raises a hand to save Mahmoud's protest of embarrassment.) Never mind - don't bother to affirm or deny the charge now. Listen to me first. This Sekou Kuyateh is a strong runner in the field. In fact, if my wife is correct, he's something of an odds on favourite. But to be blunt, Mahmoud, I shall be most unhappy to have Kuyateh for a son-in-law.

Mahmoud: (Chokingly.) But - Sir - I'm sure if you object to Sekou - you'd object just as strongly to me.

Dauda: (Deciding to be very frank.) I probably do. But in the long run, Mahmoud (half in a politician's craftiness, half sincerely) the only real difference between us is that - my ancestors were better organizers in war than yours.<sup>64</sup>

Later in the play, the two men go as far as collaborating to murder Siata's fiancé in order to carry out their evil plan. Dauda is an educated man, but this has not cleansed him of traditional chauvinistic attitudes towards daughters. The yearning for power and the material wealth that goes with it is so strong that it confuses him, making him view his daughter in terms of the price one has to pay for political success. The playwright's attitude towards such politicians is that they are murderers and they would not hesitate to murder their daughters if they stood in their way to political success. This is indicated by Dauda's use of hunting imagery when referring to his daughter just as he uses it to refer to political gains. Notice,



'What about the swag after the kill?' and 'This Sekou Kuyateh is a strong runner in the field'.<sup>65</sup>

The plight of daughters in post-independence African politics is examined further in Easmon's second play, The New Patriots. Here, the playwright takes a heroine whose father and fiancé are both government officials holding high political posts. Fred, the father, is a government minister while John, the fiancé, is his permanent secretary. Mahmeh has two problems emanating from this situation. First, she is caught up in the two men's political conflicts, and secondly her position as a minister's daughter reduces John's confidence in himself as her future husband.

Fred is a corrupt government minister and for this reason he hates John because he cannot be relied upon ~~to~~ covering up for him in the game of embezzling public funds. He therefore will not have this kind of man as a potential son-in-law. Here one immediately notices the tendency to view daughters' marriages only in terms of material gains for the parents and not in terms of the girls' future happiness. Mahmeh's situation is aggravated by the fact that her father's position has a negative effect on John's commitment to their relationship. This is not merely because Fred is a corrupt minister but because being a minister's daughter Mahmeh is placed in a prestigious social position which is publicly too high for John's confidence. This is indicated in the young man's proposal to Mahmeh towards the end of the play:

Oh, my dear - my dearest Mahmeh! While you were my minister's daughter, I'd have hesitated to say what I'm going to say now.

My pride as a Hayford would not have borne it that either my friends or my enemies should believe I was using you as a political lever to advance my own interests and ambitions. But now that I know for a fact that your father's political career is at an end ... Mahmeh, will you marry me?<sup>66</sup>

John's proposal of marriage to Mahmeh is not as selfless as he would like people to believe. His claims that he would not use Mahmeh as a political lever are false considering the price she has to pay before he proposes to her. Mahmeh has to steal a file from her father which John uses to expose the minister's corruption and bring about the end of his political career. Secondly, the young man does not make up his mind between Violet, his other girl-friend, and Mahmeh until he has assured himself that the latter can occupy a dependent position as his wife. Apart from her father's downfall, Mahmeh's humiliation by the mob during the subsequent political riot places John in a situation where he can now look down on the young woman as her saviour and hence ensure her subservience once she marries him. He admits this when he says:

The difference between her and Vi ... sticks out a mile. Vi is completely independent in outlook. I doubt if she'll really need a man in her inner life, except to father her children. She's modern, self-contained in herself four-square in the world. She doesn't need me. Mahmeh's life, on the other hand, would be incomplete without me.

Why ... Look at the way these two girls have come out of this trying day. If I'd not been with her, Mahmeh would most certainly have been killed ...

Till this afternoon I was not sure in my heart about Mahmeh. But when I saw those hooligans attacking her, something exploded inside me ...<sup>67</sup>

It required Mahmeh to be attacked, humiliated and placed in a

dependent and subordinate situation for John to see her as a potential wife instead of the minister's daughter he has always feared she was. Mahmeh's precarious situation in her relations with John indicates that even for intellectuals like the latter women are still seen in inferior terms and their political power, however indirect as in the case of Mahmeh, is viewed as a threat to the male ego and superiority. It is ironical that John, a permanent secretary and therefore a policy maker, should hold such a chauvinistic attitude towards women when there is so much talk about the new nations' aspirations for justice for all their citizens in independent Africa.

In Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again<sup>68</sup> Ola Rotimi ridicules the way in which women are used as bridges for men to reach the electorate. Rahman Taslim Lejoka-Brown, potential candidate for parliamentary elections, puts his political ambitions before his family. He has a very chauvinistic attitude towards women. For instance, none of his three wives is for mutual social partnership; each one is a tool in his pursuit of a political career. The first wife's role is to act as the mother-pillar for the family; he actually relates to her as if she is his mother. The second one is for future social exhibition if he becomes a government minister and the third one is only temporary to enable him<sup>to</sup> tap the votes of the women electorate.

Although he expects Elizabeth, his second wife, to play the role of 'social relations officer' if he becomes a government minister, Lejoka-Brown does not want her in Nigeria during the elections. At the moment Lejoka-Brown fears that being foreign-born (Elizabeth is a



non-Nigerian black woman) she may be used by his opponents to claim that he is not committed to Nigeria. He also fears that she may discover that he is a polygamist and would therefore like her to come when he has discarded his other two wives, particularly Sikira whom he wants to use during the elections. Elizabeth's welfare during the elections is of no consequence to Lejoka-Brown but he expects her to play her role when he is ready for her after the elections. As the subsequent friction between Lejoka-Brown and Elizabeth indicates, the latter's position is that of the 'modern' women whom African men, particularly politicians, marry for prestige as well as economic purposes but are unwilling to compromise with their independence.

The marriage of Lejoka-Brown to Sikira, his third wife, is an illustration of the way in which women are used in post-independence Africa as ladders to reach the electorate. In Nigeria, the market women are a very powerful force in politics and especially during the time of elections. The nature of the <sup>work of the</sup> Nigerian market women is such that it allows them to communicate with people from all walks of life. A parliamentary candidate who has the support of the market women has therefore very many chances of winning. It is for this very success that Lejoka-Brown marries Sikira, the daughter of the President of the Nigerian Union of Market Women.

Although Lejoka-Brown is aware of the votes he is likely to gain from his liaison with Sikira, he is not prepared to satisfy her needs as a wife. He regards her as a problem and already he has calculated how to discard her as soon as he has won the elections. Notice his

attitude towards Sikira and towards women in general in the following excerpt:

Lejoka-Brown: Her marriage is for emergency, in order that ... What type of question are you asking? ... "Why didn't I tell Liza; why didn't I tell" - What's the matter? Does a man have to broadcast to one wife every time he marries a new one?

(lowering his voice)

That woman's case is only for necessity, anyway - temporary measure. We need women's votes, man, if we must win the next elections.

Okonkwo: And what would one extra woman do to win you those votes?

Lejoka-Brown: She is the daughter of the President of the Nigerian Union of Market Women.

Okonkwo: Oooh.

Lejoka-Brown: (triumphantly) See what I mean? Everything would have worked out according to plan once the elections were over. See? I give Sikira a lump sum capital to go and trade and look for another man or something like that; Mama Rashida remains in this house of my fathers; and I move into Minister's quarters on Victoria Island. Liza joins me there: everybody is happy ...

Okonkwo: Send the two women away for the time being.

Lejoka-Brown: To where? And what if Sikira's mother finds out that I have kicked her only daughter out of my house, so I can drag in my Ameriko? Chuu! Finish! That'll be the end of my politics!<sup>69</sup>

The disappointing thing about Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again is that the comic aspect of the play detracts from the seriousness of the issues raised. It seems Rotimi is only interested in women's issues

merely to get material to create entertaining drama. This is disappointing considering this playwright's seriousness in political issues.

The Role of Women in Post-independence Materialistic Culture

Khaemba Ongeti (M) Kenya: Visiki (Stumps) 1984

Lubwa P'Chong (M) Uganda: The Minister's Wife 1983

It was mentioned above that one of the major problems with contemporary politics in free Africa is the misinterpretation of independence and progress to mean the acquisition of power and accumulation of material wealth. Subsequently a culture of greed for political power and material wealth has developed. The class of people who belong to this culture think only about how to get rich quickly, even if it means starving or killing others to attain this goal. Survival in this culture depends on corrupt politics and a dormant conscience. Playwrights who have based their plays on this situation depict women as the catalysts behind men's indulgence in corrupt politics. This is the image projected through Bibi Tamaa and Pearl Adnagu in Khaemba Ongeti's Visiki (Stumps)<sup>70</sup> and Lubwa P'Chong's The Minister's Wife<sup>71</sup>, respectively.

Visiki examines a situation whereby Africans have taken over farms and businesses formerly owned by white colonialists. The playwright is critical of the way in which these Africans continue the same exploitation and mistreatment of their workers as the latter used to experience during the colonial rule. Like their white predecessors, Ndovu and Bibi Tamaa use government power to undermine the rights of



the workers in order to squeeze maximum profits from them. On a symbolic level the two represent the African élite who took over leadership from the colonialists after the attainment of independence.

Our interest in this play is the portrayal of Bibi Tamaa. Bibi Tamaa is presented as the power behind Ndovu's greed for wealth and exploitation of the workers. The relationship between Bibi Tamaa and Ndovu is implicit in the very names the playwright gives them. 'Ndovu' is Kiswahili for 'elephant', while 'Tamaa' means 'desire'. Ndovu's name is derived from African story-telling tradition whereby the elephant is presented as a big, heavy and somewhat stupid animal. Tamaa is a name of the playwright's own making and its significance in the context of the play is quite clear. If Elephant has the political weight, this on its own is not enough to make him corrupt; he needs the mind to desire wealth and this is provided by Bibi Tamaa. The analogy here is very similar to the story of Adam and Eve whereby Adam had all the means to the tree of knowledge but he needed Eve's desire to influence him to disobey God's command and eat the forbidden fruit!

Bibi Tamaa is presented as a dehumanized woman who has lost all the positive qualities associated with women. She has no mercy towards the poor workers. The workers find it ironical that she who has no children swims in great wealth while they who have large families have nothing. Bibi Tamaa is also presented as a devil in disguise. She uses her sweet tongue to camouflage her schemes of exploiting the poor and squeezing out of them the little that they have. She is depicted

as the main culprit behind the killing of the ideals of independence since she is the one who propels Ndovu on the road of greedy accumulation of wealth. There is a very close parallel between Bibi Tamaa and Pearl Adnagu in Lubwa P'Chong's The Minister's Wife. Pearl Adnagu is a corrupt influence on her husband just as Bibi Tamaa is a corrupt influence on Ndovu. But in The Minister's Wife the comparison between the man as a positive character while the woman is negative is more obvious than in Visiki.

Odoma, Pearl Adnagu's husband, wants to contest parliamentary elections by fair and just means. Pearl Adnagu on the other hand is for violence and even death on the opponents. She holds the perverted view of independence held by many people in free Africa that political liberation means material advancement even at the expense of the lives of one's fellow-citizens. This is why she urges her husband to use ruthless means to win the elections in order that she can attain her dream of becoming a minister's wife and lead a rich and lazy life. The urgency in her tone as she hammers at her husband's honesty matches the get-rich-quick speed of those who are not interested in meaningful reconstruction of post-independence African societies:

You must have a mental block! Our society is materialistic and corrupt! It is only the unscrupulous and hard-hitting people who can succeed. Only the rich are respected in society. Saints like you are social misfits ... Now you are standing for parliament! But within these past weeks I have watched my hopes of becoming a minister's wife shattered! Now I will lose everything I have imagined. I am already known to many as the wife of a ministerial candidate. (sadly) They will make fun of me now. I will remain a nurse. And I hate my duties in the hospital ... All because you want to fight the election in the regular fashion! But let

me tell you, you fool! No one can win any election by being clean ... You must tell lies, bribe people, intimidate your opponent and his supporters, character assassinate, and hire political boys if you want to win.<sup>72</sup>

Adnagu is obsessed with two phenomena which are characteristic of post-independence Africa: food and death. The food symbolizes her greed for material wealth while death is the annihilation of anyone who is a threat to her acquisition of this wealth. Whereas her husband values life, peace and love, Adnagu is revolted by anything that nurtures life or a healthy society. The contrast between the two characters is apparent from the many absurd dialogues in the play, for example, in the following excerpt:

Adnagu: (removes Odoma's hands from his ears and shouts)  
Human life has become very cheap to me now! And the sight of blood makes me joyful.

Odoma: Can't you value life?

Adnagu: (to audience) Let us all rejoice in blood! ...

Odoma: Pray, Pearl. Pray! Let there be peace in our hearts.

Adnagu: How should I pray? Tell me! Should I sit silently, crosslegged like a cripple? Or drum, sing, and dance like a dancing maniac?<sup>73</sup>

According to Lubwa P'Chong, Pearl Adnagu symbolizes Uganda confused after her experiences during the terrible dictatorial rule of Idi Amin. The name Adnagu is Uganda read from end to beginning. Pearl has an ironic significance as it is derived from Uganda's pet name during her prosperous days when she was known as 'the Pearl of Africa'. The irony comes through when one compares the name and the actual situation in Uganda during and after Amin; a period of chaos and total



anarchy. The playwright explains the symbolism as follows:

The woman is a personification of Uganda .../She/ symbolises the majority of Uganda whose heads are not correct now. Whatever she utters on stage, whatever she does on stage, reflects what the majority of Ugandans are doing. We have got ambitious, we want to become like this woman, we would like to become a minister's wife. But instead of playing it cleanly we normally want to take a short cut. And this sort of thing normally brings death.<sup>74</sup>

Whereas it would be untrue to claim that women do not participate in the culture of power and material acquisition, it is chauvinistic to represent women as the catalysts behind men's indulgence in corrupt politics and greed for wealth the way Ongeti and P'Chong do. Where women are involved in this culture, their participation in it is on an individual basis just as in the case of the men. But there is a tendency to excuse corrupt men using their wives or their mistresses as the ones to blame, particularly if the man gets into political trouble or loses his social standing. The two playwrights seem to subscribe to the myth which presents women as having such a strong power of evil that they are capable of corrupting the most innocent man to become the worst crook. It is interesting to note how such a myth and the negative attitude of playwrights like Ongeti and P'Chong are counter-acted by playwrights who use women as positive symbols of countries and ideals of meaningful nation-building in the analysis below.

#### The Role of Women as Symbols of Post-independence Ideals

Seydou Badian (M) Mali: The Death of Chaka 1968

Joe de Graft (M) Ghana: Muntu 1977

Mukotani Rugyendo (M) Tanzania:  
The Contest 1977

The device of using women as symbols of countries or societies is a fascinating aspect of African creative writing. Ali Mazrui's somewhat romantic analysis of the relationship between African women and the land would partly explain the root of this tendency. According to Mazrui, African women protect the land and its fertility through tilling it and making it yield food. In view of this, the professor concludes, African women are custodians of the earth.<sup>75</sup> The reference and the conception of countries in feminine terms would also partly explain this tendency.

Some playwrights on the contemporary period have used female characters as symbols of countries and ideals which are necessary in nation-building if independence is to be a reality. In Seydou Badian's The Death of Chaka<sup>76</sup>, Joe de Graft's Muntu<sup>77</sup> and Mukotani Rugendo's The Contest<sup>78</sup>, women are used to symbolise various aspects of positive post-independence nation-building.

Badian's The Death of Chaka is based on the experiences of a newly independent African country. The playwright focusses on the struggle for power between the older nationalists and the new; he sees such conflicts as possible threats to the peace and stability needed as a base for post-independence nation-building. The female character, Notibe, is used both as a symbol of the newly-independent country and as the playwright's mouthpiece on the attitude the citizens need to take in order to build the new nation.

The symbol of Notibe is derived from the story of Chaka's life history where this renowned warrior and leader is said to have saved a

young girl from being mauled by a hyena.<sup>79</sup> Badian transposes this story from the pre-colonial phase to the colonial and uses Chaka's act of rescuing this girl as an analogy of the liberation of African countries from colonial fetters. This is implicit from what Notibe says about herself:

Before Chaka neither our harvests nor our children belonged to us ... In short we were an enslaved people. And don't forget, I owe him a personal debt. I was that young girl who was carried off from a hut one night by a hyena ... That night, for the first time a young man dared to confront the dreaded hyena. That young man was Chaka. He killed the beast and saved my life. And remember, too, how during the same period he faced a lion alone and killed it. Thanks to Chaka, the wild animals left us in peace ... It is not therefore the leader I am defending. It is because I want to be proud of you, to be able always to carry my head high among my companions.<sup>80</sup>

Notibe's concern is that peace and stability be established in the new nation as the initial step towards development. In the above speech, Notibe appeals to the new nationalists to recognize the early nationalists' contributions and subsequently work with them to build the new nation instead of fighting against them for political power. The early nationalists are symbolised by Chaka in this play.

Badian uses Notibe's attitude towards herself as the symbol of an independent country to outline the kind of attitude citizens of independent Africa should have towards their nations. A nation belongs to all its citizens, not just to the politicians or those who are close to power. It follows therefore then, that all should be prepared to share its resources as well as the efforts needed to build it. To the playwright, this is the only way a country can stand with



dignity among other independent nations and avoid disintegration. The climax of Notibe's message is built around this ideal which at the same time spells out the kind of commitment required from the citizens towards their nations. She tells the new nationalists:

I was Mapo's sister. I was Dingana's fiancée. Now I am neither Mapo's sister nor Dingana's fiancée. I am Chaka's daughter ... If my people must collapse, I prefer to be dead and buried.<sup>81</sup>

Like Notibe, First Daughter in de Graft's Muntu is dedicated to peace and stability. In the pre-colonial phase examined in the play, First Daughter acts as a mother figure for her brothers and sisters. She contributes significantly to the peace and harmony of Muntuland during this phase. The gap created by her absence from Muntuland during the colonial phase as a result of her dismissal by Second Brother is felt particularly by the younger members of Muntu community who appear extremely helpless in the face of external influences from slave raiders and colonial exploiters.

The latter part of de Graft's play examines the phase of military dictatorship in contemporary African politics. It is in this phase where a unifying force dedicated to peace and stability is most pertinently required. In her challenge of Second Brother's destructive power, First Daughter appears a potential of such a unifying force. She challenges Second Brother thus:

You are evil!  
 You brought upon us the curse of God  
 You sowed among us seeds of mistrust  
 You trampled on our human dignity  
     Making us grovel like swine  
     On the ground before you;

And would you now threaten our souls with destruction,  
 Having murdered our Eldest Brother -  
 Murdered him in cold blood?<sup>82</sup>

First Daughter is in many ways an antithesis to Second Brother whose main interest is political power and personal grandeur. Peace and harmony are a threat to him and it is no wonder then he murders First Daughter at the earliest opportunity. To gain political power and personal grandeur Second Brother has to eliminate others and this implies doing away with forces which value human life and social stability.

Maendeleo, in Mukotani Rugyendo's The Contest<sup>83</sup> is used as a symbol of meaningful aspects of independence. Maendeleo is the symbol of positive progress which is beneficial to the welfare of the masses. She is not 'the society of the African masses' as Michael Etherton suggests.<sup>84</sup> The term 'maendeleo' literally means 'progress' or 'development' in Kiswahili. But this is not the only indication of the symbolic significance of this female character; the meaning of her role is suggested by the attitude those characters who represent the masses have towards her. To them, she embodies the objectives for which they have worked in the past as well as their aspirations for future development.

The Drummer outlines the significance of Maendeleo right at the beginning of the play when he introduces the symbolic contest to win this girl as a bride. He says:

But it is not such an easy day for all of us here. As you can see, some of us are about to be put to heavy test.

Maendeleo, the daughter of the village, is the product of our collective force. She has been fashioned by the things around us; in the heat of the life we lead. Our productive labour, which provides us with the things we all enjoy is the thing that has created the necessary conditions for the growth of our Maendeleo. The standards, likes and dislikes, created in this process are the standards that have served as her examples. She is our representative both physically and spiritually. She is the symbol of our development. She is indeed our development itself.<sup>85</sup>

The relevance of having these words uttered by the Drummer should not be missed. Like the griot, the community drummer in Africa is the voice of the people. Therefore what the Drummer articulates in the speech quoted above and in the play as a whole expresses the hopes and aspirations of the masses.

The significance of Maendeleo as the embodiment of meaningful progress and development is also suggested by the contrasting aspirations of the hero who loses her and the one who wins her. The loser emphasizes perverted views of independence. These are aspirations related to personal gains rather than to the welfare of the nation as a whole. Instead of unity in nation-building and in the sharing of national resources, Hero 1 emphasizes competition in personal accumulation of wealth.

In contrast to Hero 1, Hero 2 is dedicated to the building of a society where citizens share both the work and the fruits of their labour; a society where people do not exploit one another but co-operate in development. Notice this from Hero 2's speech which moves Old Woman and Old Man and thus opens the way to his victory in the contest:



Spirit of the Nkosis. The vigilant and fierce Nkosis. The humane Nkosis who speak of co-operation. Who do not allow a man to eat too much while another one is starving. Who detest a man who leads others by the nose. Who stands for the great dignity of everyone - whether man or woman ... whether old or young. We do not tolerate a person who grows fat on other people's sweat when he is doing nothing. We move like soldiers to our work. (Marches like a soldier.) Weee! (Shaking his fists.) We come with so much to find so much to feed, develop, create and recreate Maendeleo.<sup>86</sup>

Hero 2's aspirations represent the socialist ideals Tanzania has been striving for since the Arusha Declaration.<sup>87</sup> To this end, therefore, his victory in winning Maendeleo as his bride would suggest that this young woman symbolizes these ideals.

It has been observed that in both the traditional and the contemporary African settings, women's role in politics is fraught with problems, owing to their inferior social positions and also because of social prejudices against women. It has also been observed that the attitude towards women's role in politics differs from playwright to playwright. Those writers who respect women's participation in politics project positive images of women whereas writers who subscribe to social prejudices against women represent their participation through negative female characters. Greater attention is given to the portrayal of women in African drama in the next two chapters which comprise Part II of this study.

The next section looks at the representation of women in a peculiar contemporary political environment: the South African apartheid system.

### The South African Scene

The last section in our examination of the representation of women in politics centres on the black South African woman. A pertinent point to note in relation to South African literature is how deeply the lives and experiences of the characters are interwoven with the socio-political background of the creative writing.

The apartheid political system of South Africa which is based on racial discrimination is a crucial tool to have in mind when analysing literature from South Africa as its effects permeate all protest literature from that part of the continent. This is the point made by South African novelist, Alex la Guma, when he states:

And South African literature, I am prepared to say, is that literature which concerns itself with the realities of South Africa. And what are the realities of South Africa? When we sit down to write a book, I or any of my colleagues around me, we are, as writers, faced with the reality that 80% of the population lives below the bread-line standard; we are faced with the reality that the average daily population of South African prisons amounts to 70,000 persons. We are faced with the reality that half the non-white people who died last year were below the age of five years. These are the realities. Even if we want to ignore these gruesome details and think in terms of culture and art in South Africa we are faced with the fact that in South Africa today people are not allowed to develop their minds along the lines which they prefer.<sup>88</sup>

In examining the representation of the black woman from South Africa, therefore, we are compelled to look at her from a somewhat different perspective from that of women from other parts of Africa. We cannot ignore, for example, the fact that the black South African woman is a victim of dual oppression. Besides being a victim of the

oppression experienced by all black people in South Africa as a result of discrimination against her race, the black South African woman is a victim of sexual oppression by virtue of her status as a woman. Winnie Mandela, the prominent black South African woman freedom fighter, goes further than this in her assessment of the disadvantaged position of the black woman in South Africa. She says:

A black woman faces a three-fold disability in this country: she has to overcome the disadvantage of being black, the disadvantage of being a woman and the disadvantage of her African cultural background in an essentially westernized environment.<sup>89</sup>

Whatever assessment one follows in a discussion based on the position of the black South African woman, it must be noted that the various facets of her oppression are often so intricately interwoven that it is difficult to discuss them as separate entities.

Our introduction to this section would be incomplete without a word on the peculiarity of the characterization of women in South African drama. In some plays, women appear as ideas or symbols rather than distinct individuals. The reason for this is that the major preoccupation of creative writers who base their works on the South African experience is to make statements against the evils of the apartheid system. Many playwrights, therefore, consciously or unconsciously, view the art of characterization as subsidiary to making ideological statements.

The representation of the black South African woman is discussed under 'The Black South African Woman and Sexual Exploitation' and 'The Mother Figure in South African Drama'.



The Black South African Woman and Sexual Exploitation

Athol Fugard (M) South Africa: No-Good Friday 1977  
Nongogo 1977

Gibson Kente (M) South Africa: Too Late 1981

Zakes Mda (M) South Africa: Dead End 1978

Credo Mtna (M) South Africa: uNosilimela 1981

P. Mtna (M) South Africa )

M. Ngema (M) South Africa ): Woza Albert 1983

B. Simon (M) South Africa )

The image of the black South African woman as a mere sexual tool for men's pleasure is a dominant one even in plays which do not have a single female character. This predicament of the black South African woman can only be understood in the context of apartheid. The apartheid laws and their implementation create a circumscribed life of tension and fear for the majority of the people. Women become easy prey for sexual exploitation since indulgence in sex is one way of releasing tension. Owing to the fact that the white South African woman is protected by law, the black woman is left as the major victim of this kind of exploitation.

The image of the black woman as a tool for emotional release comes through in Mtna, Ngema and Simon's Woza Albert.<sup>90</sup> In the role play of Mbongeni as labourer-customer, and Percy as a young street meat vendor, the labourer is not really interested in the boy's meat. All he wants is to create prospects for himself to sleep with the boy's mother whom he does not even know. An excerpt from their conversation illustrates this point:

Mbongeni: Hullo, my boy.

Percy: Hello baba.

Mbongeni: (not tempted by the display.) Eh hh, what meat can you sell me today?

Percy: I've got mutton, chicken, and nice sausages. (Swats a fly on the sausages.)

Mbongeni: Oh yeah ... the chicken does not smell nice, hey? ... Okay my boy, give me mutton chops. Two rand fifty, hay? Where's your mother, my boy?

Percy: She's at work.

Mbongeni: She's at work? Tell her I said 'took-a-took-a' on her nose. (Tickles the boy's nose.) She must visit me at the men's hostel, okay? Dube hostel, room number 126, block 'B', okay. Bye-bye, my boy. 'B', don't forget.<sup>91</sup>

There is a direct connection between apartheid and the black worker's living conditions which in turn force him to use the black woman as a mere sexual tool. The worker in the above excerpt lives in a men's hostel and not in a home situation with a wife and children. This is partly owing to the rigidity of the apartheid pass regulations<sup>92</sup> and partly because of the general exploitation of the black worker under apartheid whereby he is paid very low wages. These factors make it difficult for a black worker to live with his family at his place of work, for example, in the city or in the mines. Hence the black woman becomes a scapegoat of a political system in which she has no hand in the making.

Apart from being used sexually, the black urban woman is used as a sexual image to sustain the black male worker's emotions under

strenuous working conditions in South Africa. Notice this, for example, from Mbongeni's role-play as a brickyard worker in Woza Albert:

Lights flash on. Bright daylight. Coronation Brickyard. Mbongeni, as Zuluboy, is singing:

Mbongeni: (singing) Akuntombi lokhu kwabulala ubhuti ngesibumbu kuyamsondeza. (This is no woman. She killed my brother with a fuck and she never lets him go.)

(He calls out towards the street) Hey Angelina - Sweetheart! Why are you walking down the street? Come here to Coronation Brickyard! Zuluboy is waiting for you with a nice present! (Points to his genitals laughing.)<sup>93</sup>

Sexual harassment of the black woman is recurrent in South African plays where actual female characters appear. In her cultural journey in her search for true African roots, uNosilimela in Credo Mtwale's play of this title<sup>94</sup> undergoes extreme sexual harassment. Her contact with men in the city is always on a sexual level whereby she is used as an object for sexual pleasure without anyone recognizing that she is a human being. It is interesting to note that at one time uNosilimela is even used by a fellow woman to earn money for her in a brothel. But this comes through as part of the playwright's general criticism against the urban culture rather than as a comment on the way in which women join male oppressors to victimize their own kind.

The disturbing thing about uNosilimela, as is the case with Woza Albert, is that the playwrights' feelings vis-à-vis the plight of the black woman are lacking. In Woza Albert the absence of an actual female character representing the oppressed black woman makes it impossible for the audience to sympathize with her; it is difficult to empathize



with a mere situation especially when the playwright distances, not only the heroines but also himself from the situation he examines. As mentioned elsewhere in this study, this is a problem of many male playwrights.

Mtwa fails to raise the audience's sympathies for his heroine because he makes her represent too many urban situations in the culture he is criticizing and he makes these situations more important than the heroine herself. Furthermore uNosilimela is never allowed to live in a situation long enough for her plight as a character to create an impact. Ironically, it is as though the playwright joins the very system which treats black women as objects and uses his heroine merely as an object through which to make certain statements. This is unfortunate because, considering that black urban South African women are even greater victims of oppression than their male counterparts, a closer focus on their plight would strengthen a creative writer's position against the destructive effects of apartheid on black people's lives. It is this kind of strength that the sensitive examination of the plight of the black urban woman contributes to the ideological statements of Gibson Kente and Zakes Mda in Too Late<sup>95</sup> and Dead End<sup>96</sup>, respectively.

Kente's sympathies for the black urban South African woman are conveyed through his close examination of her victimization in a subtle web of injustice. What really distinguishes Kente's approach from that of Mtwa is that, whereas the latter's male chauvinism prevents him from viewing women as capable of protesting against injustice and therefore

makes him present his heroine as a helpless creature which is tossed here and there, Kente presents his heroines as human beings who are strong enough to react against injustice, notwithstanding the strength of the arm of the perverted South African law. This is the perspective from which Kente presents the shebeen queen<sup>97</sup> Madinto and her daughter Ntanana in Too Late.

Though young, crippled and somewhat retarded, the girl Ntanana is ready to fight the policeman who represents the arm of perverted justice when he comes to arrest her cousin. Although her struggle ends in failure and in her death, Ntanana's attempt in itself is an indication that she is a human being and not a helpless creature. This young heroine, whose appearance in Kente's play is quite brief, arouses greater sympathies and leaves a greater impression in us on the plight of the urban black woman in South Africa than Mtwa's mature heroine uNosilimela.

Through Madinto Kente criticizes the way in which the law is misused to exploit the black woman. Failure to see Madinto's plight beyond the South African liquor laws as Robert Kavanagh does is to oversimplify the predicament of the black South African woman.<sup>98</sup> Madinto is a victim of more than the South African liquor laws. She is a victim of sexual exploitation. The policeman Pelepele hovers around Madinto's place, not so much to check on her activities in the sale of illicit liquor, but because he wants to sleep with her. In other words, he wants to misuse his power as an arm of the law to exploit the black woman sexually. This is indicated quite early in

the play, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

Pelepele, the policeman, has entered meanwhile and is busy admiring Madinto, lightly caressing her around her waist and thighs, though Madinto has kept on unconsciously brushing those touched parts. He now pulls her by the dress.

Madinto:           What are you doing? Wenzani? Pulling my dress!

Pelepele:        (Making the heart love sign) We two talk love.

Madinto:        Voetsek! Uyini wena? Sishumane lesi!  
                  (advancing on him aggressively.)

                  (Voetsek! What are you? You Sishumane!)<sup>99</sup>

Notice the way in which the playwright uses even otherwise insignificant stage directions to show Madinto's resistance against the policeman's approaches. Apart from this resistance against sexual exploitation, the playwright gives a very dignified impression of Madinto when he describes her house as clean and neat, hence preventing us from viewing her as a stereotyped shebeen queen whom social prejudice automatically dismisses as a prostitute.

By the time Madinto goes to jail charged with contravening the liquor laws and comes back home to find her nephew jailed over the pass laws and her daughter murdered by the same policeman she rebuffs, we not only know her as a dignified human being, but we also know that she is a victim of dual oppression as a black person and as a woman. With this kind of knowledge, we cannot help sympathizing with the black South African woman and condemning the system which is responsible for her victimization.

In his article entitled 'Sex and Politics in Southern African



Literature' Lewis Nkosi limits himself to sex relations between black people and white people; that is he limits himself to racial boundaries and gives the impression that there are no sex problems between black and black.<sup>100</sup> Nkosi's reference to the 'dialectical link of love and hatred between Black and White, victim and victimiser',<sup>101</sup> for example, illustrates this narrow view of analysing sexual oppression only in racial terms. Zakes Mda's Dead End<sup>102</sup> goes beyond Nkosi's analysis and shows that the oppression which exists on sexual lines cannot be narrowed down to the antagonism between black and white in South Africa. Mda views the black urban South African woman as a victim of sexual exploitation and he sees the black man as much guilty as the white man in this form of oppression.

Mda castigates the black man who uses black girls as commodities and rationalizes this attitude by arguing that these girls need to be sexually exploited in order to survive. Charley lives by 'selling' black girls to 'sex-starved whites',<sup>103</sup> but his conscience is not troubled in the least for doing this kind of job. Notice his attitude from what he tells his girl-friend Tseli:

Those girls earn big money. And if you suggest that I, Charley, am responsible for their ways - better you think again. I don't go 'round houses recruiting girls to walk the streets. They come to Western Avenue themselves. All they want from me is an introduction. In any case if I don't go out there to look for them, somebody else will - and you won't have anything to eat.<sup>104</sup>

Charley exploits black women not only by selling them to white men but also through keeping a woman only as a sex object. He is happy to live with Tseli so long as she does not ask for marriage or have a baby.

When she gets pregnant she has to go through an abortion because Charley does not want family responsibilities. 'Be sensible my girl ...', he tells Tseli, 'we can't afford it. So we must get rid of it.'<sup>105</sup>

The full implications of Charley's treatment of Tseli and of the black South African woman in general does not hit him until one of his Western Avenue white customers attacks Tseli, arguing that there is no difference between her and the girls Charley sells at Western Avenue, viz., they are all sex objects. The subsequent tug-of-war between Charley, a black man, and Frikkie, a white man, over Tseli is one of the most vivid dramatizations of the extent of the degradation of the black urban woman in South African drama. Charley narrates how Frikkie confronts him and Tseli when he is taking the latter to the abortionist:

I was holding her. Her head was on my shoulder. And there was Frikkie leaning against that sloppy signpost that announces to one and all: Western Avenue.

Oh Charley! You have brought me a nice one today. You sure are going classy. I hope prices are still the same.

'This is my girl, Frikkie', I tell him, 'This is Tseli. She is a decent type.'

'Come on now. Don't play smart. You are taking her to some other whites, eh?'...

'I am telling you, Frikkie, this is my girl.'

What does he do, the bastard. He grabs Tseli and says, 'Come baby, I am as good as those he is taking you to.'

I pulled her back. A tug of war ...<sup>106</sup>

Charley's naivety about the South African situation and about his contribution to the status quo vis-à-vis the black urban woman is apparent from his attitude towards Tseli during this scuffle. He

believes that the fact that Tseli lives with him is enough to make her command greater respect than other black urban women. But the way in which he uses her indicates that she is no different from the black girls he sells to those whites who want to sleep with black women in spite of, or deliberately to defy the Sex Immorality Act.<sup>107</sup> Charley's attempts to exonerate himself from guilt in his relationship with Tseli blinds him ~~to~~ the irony behind his antagonism against Frikkie on the mere fact that the latter takes Tseli as a sex object. Frikkie's attitude towards Tseli is not different from that of Charley: the aim of the present journey to the abortionist is to remove obstacles which may upset Charley's exploitation of Tseli as a sex object.

It should be noted that on a deeper level, Mda is using the black woman as an appropriate symbol of the country, South Africa, through which to make a political statement. Mda sees apartheid as a system through which South Africa is ravaged and raped. Frikkie du Toit symbolizes the white minority government whose laws and practices devour instead of nourishing the country. Charley represents the black man whose collaboration has helped perpetuate the status quo. The tug-of-war between the two men for the black woman dramatizes the critical moment when the black man is called upon to make a choice: either to continue helping the white man rape the country or to risk his life in defence of the country.

From his presentation of the black woman it is apparent that Mda sees a direct relationship between her plight and the South African political system; the black woman is a victim of apartheid. This is



quite different from the impression given by Athol Fugard in his presentation of Queeny and Rebecca in Nongogo<sup>108</sup> and No-Good Friday<sup>109</sup>, respectively. The reading or the viewing of these two plays leaves one with no doubt that Fugard is sympathetic towards the black woman, but two problems can be observed in this playwright's work. The first problem is that he does not make a link between the black woman's plight and apartheid, as Kente and Mda, for example, do in the plays examined above. The second problem is inability to present a true picture of black heroines, perhaps owing to the fact that he is a white writer who has never really lived closely enough to black women to understand them fully.

Queeny is a shebeen queen and her background is the common poverty-stricken home of black families in the urban area, a home of many malnourished children with a father who drinks the whole of his paypacket on Friday as an escape from frustrations. Queeny's childhood dream subsequently is to become a shebeen queen and grow fat. When her mother dies, she therefore flees from home and becomes a nongogo<sup>110</sup> prostitute. Queeny attains her dream of a fat shebeen queen, but even her wealth cannot fill the vacuum which her experiences as a nongogo prostitute leave in her. In fact the money she gets merely serves as a constant reminder of how she started earning her living and contributes to her psychological torment. 'It's money I don't like the feel of', she says, 'It's a greasy coin that stinks of dirty sheets and unwashed men.'<sup>111</sup>

We cannot help sympathizing with Queeny when we observe her

psychological torment from her feeling that her experiences as a <sup>n</sup>~~no~~gogo reduced her to a commodity and robbed her of dignity as a woman. We pity her in her search for a man who treats her as a woman rather than a sex object, and from whom she can regain some pride in herself.

There are problems in Fugard's attitude towards his heroine which interfere with the impact of her presentation on the audience. Queeny is too stereotyped a shebeen queen to convince the audience that she ever had any dignity as a woman or that she is ever likely to gain any dignity. The contrast between her and Madinto in Kente's Too Late is too obvious to miss. Whereas Kente takes the trouble to depict character traits in Madinto which help give the impression of her as a human being, as discussed above, Fugard presents Queeny as a tart. Any idiosyncratic behaviour Queeny exhibits is motivated either by her guilty conscience or by her search for a man to treat her as a woman. At no time does Fugard allow us to see in his heroine that inner spirit which is difficult to annihilate and which enables the black woman not only to survive personally, but also to act as the pillar of other blacks' survival under the grisly South African urban conditions. This is the major problem with his portrayal of Rebecca in No-Good Friday.<sup>112</sup>

Rebecca has lived with Willie for four years under the illusion that the latter will marry her. Apart from playing the role of love mate for Willie, Rebecca has been a domestic servant as well as a mother substitute for this psychologically frustrated black man. Rebecca's services to Willie have met, not with the appreciation one would expect, but with a condescending attitude from Willie. Willie,

for example, refuses to see that Rebecca has given him moral support in his studies. Notice this lack of appreciation from Rebecca's complaint:

I said how we was all proud of him. He corrected me. The word was 'admire' ... I looked it up in that book of his with all the words. You're proud of something you had a hand in, but you admire someone that went it all alone ... Not even his poor old canary in her rusty cage helped him. Sometimes I wonder if it was best that way.<sup>113</sup>

The condescending attitude Rebecca receives from Willie coupled with the latter's feeling that she has been his mate merely for economic support is enough to make any woman who has some dignity in herself take the earliest opportunity to leave. But Rebecca is too submissive and sometimes too ambivalent to make a decision. Her submissiveness towards Willie and her ambivalence towards her situation make her reduce herself to the level of a whore in relation to Willie and prevent her from being decisive about her departure even when the man has indicated he does not appreciate her support. Fugard's attitude towards Rebecca appears to be very male chauvinistic at this point. Notice this from Rebecca's perception of herself in the following speech:

Oh, Guy! What do you think I been doing here these four days? What? Do you think I just been sitting here watching ... making coffee when he wanted it ... cooking his food. I knowed with something inside me that this was our last chance, and if you think I've wasted it I'd call on God to give witness ... I've tried everything - everything a woman can try I've tried it in here. I've tried just being here so that if he wanted something he could ask. I've tried it on that bed at night ... I offered him the comfort only a woman can offer a man. I would have let him take me like a dog takes a bitch in the street if I thought it would be comfort.<sup>114</sup>

By the time Rebecca speaks this way she has had enough humiliation



to make her leave if she still has some dignity in herself. But she is too ambivalent about her final departure to be true to herself or to the image of the black urban woman she is supposed to represent. Even when it is absolutely clear that Willie does not need her, Rebecca has the submissive attitude to ask the latter whether he is not going to bid her 'good-bye'. She finally leaves, not with dignity, but with the attitude of a hopeless creature whose survival in this city depends solely on Willie. Like Queeny who can never attain a sense of personal worth and dignity unless she finds that elusive man she has been looking for to treat her as a woman, Rebecca lacks the backbone which has enabled so many black women to survive in urban South Africa.

The second disturbing aspect of the portrayal of Rebecca and Queeny is that these heroines' creative artist is ambivalent towards the political situation which is responsible for their plight. Fugard makes very negligible attempt to show that the black urban woman's predicament as a victim of sexual exploitation cannot be divorced from the general plight of black people under apartheid.

#### The Mother Figure in South African Drama

Athol Fugard (M) South Africa: The Blood Knot 1963

Benjamin Leshoai (M) South Africa:  
Lines Draw Monsters (Act I) 1977

Khayaalethu Mqayisa (M) South Africa:  
Confused Mhlaba 1974

The mother figure is an important character in urban South African literature, perhaps more important than in the urban literature from

the rest of the continent. The reason for this is not merely because mothers form the foundations of family units, but it is linked to the socio-economic problems of black urban dwellers in South Africa.

One of the problems is that, owing to the social and economic problems of the black men, many homes depend on the women not only for emotional but also for economic sustenance. This accounts, for example, for the strong and somewhat domineering mother figures found in some of the plays. Another problem is that of the nature of the working conditions with which the black woman has to contend. The general working conditions of both black men and black women are appalling. But for the women the situation is worse because they have to do some extra duties by virtue of their sex. Mamma Lydiah Kompe, a black South African union activist, cites a very ironical situation where women are given extra duties in an organisation whose major function is to improve the working conditions of black workers. Mrs Kompe reports that in this organisation, besides her normal workload, she was expected to act as messenger for the men, make tea and wash dishes. 'You are a woman', she was told, 'you can do these things better'.<sup>115</sup> The point to note here is that in a country where the working conditions are already unbearable for all blacks, if the women are expected to do more, their already magnified role as the core of the family is affected terribly.

The mother figure is so important in South African literature which is based on black people's experiences that it is found even in plays which have no female character. Athol Fugard's The Blood Knot<sup>116</sup> has

only two characters, both male; yet the mother figure is a very dominant force in the play. The mother of Zachariah and Morris is presented as a symbolic mother representing South Africa as a country on one level, and as a literal black mother on the other. These two levels are intertwined at various points in the play. There are various statements by the two characters in this play which indicate that the mother figure is a great force in their lives. For example, they say they never knew their father, but they knew their mother. They hold the mother with respect and awe, and she is a kind of conscience in their relationship with one another.

In the role-play where Zachariah plays black man and Morris white man, the latter is hindered from continuing with the game and mistreating Zachariah by his vision of their mother. He sees their mother watching and censoring his actions:

Morris:            (rising) In fact I'd like to ... (stops himself.)

Zachariah:        Carry on.

Morris:            (Walking away.) I can't.

Zachariah:        Try.

Morris:            I'm telling you, I can't.

Zachariah:        Why?

Morris:            Not with that woman watching us. (Zachariah stops and looks questioningly at Morris.)  
Over there. (Pointing.)

Zachariah:        Old woman?

Morris:            Horribly old.



Zachariah: And she's watching us?

Morris: All the time. (Impatience) Can't you see?  
She's wearing a grey dress on Sunday.

Zachariah: (recognition dawning.) Soapsuds ...

Morris: ... On brown hands.

Zachariah: And sore feet! The toes are crooked, hey!

Morris: With sadness. She's been following me all  
day, all along the road, unending road ...  
begging! <sup>117</sup>

On one level the voice of conscience troubling Morris represents the guilty conscience of liberal white South Africans for their race's oppression of black South Africans. On another level, however, it is more closely connected to the ambivalent situation to which black urban mothers are forced by their economic situation in South Africa.

The disadvantaged economic situation of the urban black mother forces her to work, among other things, as a mother substitute for white children. This puts her in a situation of divided loyalties in relation to her own biological children on the one hand, and in relation to her white employer's children on the other. The black mother is aware of the great need her children have of her, yet at the same time she knows that their economic survival depends on her commitment to her role as a mother substitute for white children.

Notice the implication of the way in which this kind of situation robs the black child of maternal care from Zachariah's complaints about the mother's preferential treatment of Morris:

Night

The two men are asleep. Silence. Suddenly Zachariah sits

up in bed ...

Zachariah: Ma. Ma! Mother. Hullo. how are you, old woman? ... There's something I need to know, Ma ... Whose mother were you really? At the bottom of your heart where your blood is red with pain, tell me, whom did you really love? No evil feelings, Ma, but, I mean, a man's got to know.<sup>118</sup>

Fugard's basic concerns as a writer do indicate that he is sensitive to the plight of the black urban South African mother. But this playwright has problems in his presentation of black mother figures, perhaps owing to the disability mentioned elsewhere in this section about the playwright writing as a male and a white who has never had a chance to relate closely enough with black women to understand their plight fully. In actual fact it appears as though Fugard is aware of his disability in The Blood Knot because he uses two literary devices which help him avoid direct portrayal of a female character to represent his black mother figure. Unfortunately, these devices, the use of symbolism and the use of male characters to visualize the situation of their black mother, result in blurring the message of the play and detracting from the effectiveness of the playwright's presentation of the black woman.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, it is difficult to divorce South African politics from the experiences of the people. This is one of the fundamental differences between Fugard's presentation of the black mother figure and that of Khaya lethu Mqayisa and Benjamin Leshoai in Confused Mhlaba<sup>119</sup> and Lines Draw Monsters (Act I)<sup>120</sup>, respectively.

Edna's problem in Confused Mhlaba is rooted in South Africa's victimization of black political activists. Her husband Hlubi's detention for his political activities not only makes her an embittered wife and mother, it also makes her cynical about the importance of his political commitment. Contribution to the day-to-day survival of her family, to which detention renders Hlubi helpless, becomes more important for her than the long-term national ideal Hlubi is working for.

Mqayisa introduces a second female character to complement Edna in his discussion on women's role as mother figures. Joyce is not a mother in the technical sense; she is neither married nor does she have children. But her role in rehabilitating Hlubi after detention goes a long way to show the importance of South African black women as the backbone of the men and families in a world full of frustrations. Notice, for example, the difference between the portrayal of Joyce and that of Rebecca in Fugard's No-Good Friday. Where Rebecca is presented as stupid and submissive to her male friend, Joyce is portrayed as intelligent and as an equal partner to Hlubi. Rebecca's support for Guy and Willie is confined to domestic matters of food and sex. Mqayisa, on the other hand, refuses to emphasize the domestic or sexual support in connection with his heroine's relation to Hlubi in order to show that women's role goes beyond the domestic horizon. Where Rebecca's attempts to save Willie from despair fail Joyce succeeds with Hlubi. Joyce plays an important role in making Hlubi realize that detention is not the end of the road and therefore prevents him from succumbing to



despair and disintegration.

In Lines Draw Monsters (Act I), Leshoai gives a different dimension of the plight and role of black urban South African mothers. The playwright shows the frustrations through which a black mother goes in her dual role of servant of the white people and mother of her own children. Where Fugard blurs the full implication of this role by using symbolism in The Blood Knot, Leshoai gives us a clear representation by portraying an actual female character to enact the role.

The dual exploitation of the urban black South African mother is introduced right at the beginning of Lines Draw Monsters (Act I):

The action opens in the city of Bloemfontein in the Province of Orange Free State, South Africa ... The rather poorly dressed mother comes in carrying a huge bundle of laundry. On the floor, an old pair of trousers and a shirt. A pair of men's boots lies in the middle of the floor. A man's old hat is on one of the pots on the table. Masello throws the laundry on the bed, holds her hips resolutely.

Masello: Phew! Demmet! They can make one mad, the occupants of this dump. Father, sons, daughter, all the same ... No fire in the house! No water in this drum! Dirty dishes ...<sup>121</sup>

Masello arrives home carrying more work to do as servant of the white man, only to find that her grown-up children also expect her to do everything for them. Masello sees herself as a victim of dual exploitation as a family slave and as a slave of the white man, and it is no wonder that when she is emotionally upset she cannot distinguish the two oppressors from one another. Notice this from her retort to her husband when the latter tries to comfort her:

My nerves need rest? How can they when I've to wash and iron this white man's great bundle? And that son of yours who

gets lost like a needle in a haystack! Why, your daughter,  
I weep to think of her as a future mother ...

(She hides her face in her hands and weeps convulsively ...)<sup>122</sup>

Masello is very sensitive to her oppression, but in spite of this sensitivity she does not succumb to despair. She is very strong in her manner of handling her family. She admonishes them when they make her life unnecessarily difficult and she also influences them on matters outside the family horizon. For example, she acts as the voice of caution warning her husband not to get overwhelmed by his political involvement.

Unlike Rebecca in No-Good Friday who is too engrossed in her domestic affairs to pay attention to the deeper implications of black people's position in South Africa, Masello demonstrates great awareness of the racial discrimination and general oppression suffered by her people. She is very sensitive to the way in which certain aspects of the apartheid system jeopardize the urban black mothers' maternal relations with their children:

How many black mothers would listen to me if I asked them not to hate? In the mornings they go to the great city to look after the little white boys and girls. Their own children exposed to the devils' wiles! At night, they come home tired and exhausted, to find no children, no fire, no food, no water, not even a cup of tea - nothing! Some come home to find their children have been arrested ...<sup>123</sup>

Although Lines Draw Monsters (Act I) is too short a play to give us a comprehensive picture of the urban black South African mother, the glimpses we get from the character of Masello leave us with the picture of very strong women. Masello's hatred for the white people

may not be the solution to the black people's problems in South Africa, but her political awareness as a mother is crucial. It is significant to note the way in which Masello's political awareness has influenced her daughter Dikeledi. The girl is only a teenager and yet she is already showing signs of developing into a political fighter.

The representation of strong urban black South African women through characters such as Madinto in Too Late, Joyce in Confused Mhlaba and Masello in Lines Draw Monsters (Act I) supports the observation of Ellen Kuzwayo, one of South Africa's fighters for black women's rights. She says, 'I am convinced that South Africa stands on the strength and integrity of the black woman'.<sup>124</sup>



## NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

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- 3 E. Mphahlele, Oganda's Journey, unpublished dramatization of Grace Ogot's short story 'And the Rain Came' in Land without Thunder by Grace Ogot (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1968), undated.
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- 5 J.E. Henshaw, Children of the Goddess, London, University of London Press, 1964. All references and quotations are from this edition. For detailed analysis, see under 'The Role of Women as Wives of Leaders' below.
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- 13 Op.cit., p.25.

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- 18 Op.cit., p.9.
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- 20 Ibid., p.18.
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- 22 Op.cit., p.18.
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- 26 Op.cit., p.50.
- 27 Ibid., p.55.
- 28 Ibid., pp.65-66.
- 29 Isaac Waweru, The End of the Road, unpublished play, Kenya, 1982.
- 30 Nyambura Mpesha, The Happening, Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1981. All references and quotations are from this edition.
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- 35 Mugyabusu Mulokozi, Mukwava wa Uhehe, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1979; 1985 reprint. All references and quotations are from this edition. For greater detail see 'The Role of Women in the Struggles against Colonialism'.
- 36 Ama Ata Aidoo, Anowa, London, Longmans, 1970. For detailed analysis on this text, see Chapter 5.
- 37 Op.cit., p.18.
- 38 Ibid., p.33.
- 39 Ibid., p.36.
- 40 Ibid., p.13.
- 41 Frantz Fanon, A Dying Colonialism, translated from the French by Haakon Chevalier, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965.
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- 44 Op.cit.
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- 49 Op.cit.
- 50 Op.cit.
- 51 Op.cit., p.10.
- 52 Translations from Kiswahili into English on this and other texts are mine.
- 53 Op.cit., p.46.



- 54 Ibid., p.43.
- 55 Ibid., p.75. Italics mine.
- 56 Op.cit., p.29.
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- 87 The 'Arusha Declaration' of 1967 is a significant historical landmark in Tanzanian politics. It marked the beginning of the development towards a socialist economic structure initiated by the then President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere.
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- 89 Nancy Harrison, Winnie Mandela, Mother of a Nation, London, Victor Gollanz Ltd., 1985, p.60.
- 90 Percy Mtwi, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon, Woza Albert, London, Methuen, 1983. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 91 Ibid., pp.16-19.
- 92 In order to live in the urban area or to move from one area to

another in urban South Africa, a non-white person has to have permission from the South African government. Such permission is stamped in a personal identity document known as the pass. A non-white is required to carry this document at all times as the police can demand to see it any time and at any place; failure to produce the pass, for any reason, when asked to do so is construed as contravention of the South African apartheid laws. Permission for non-whites to move from one place to another is not automatic and victimization on account of the pass laws occurs very frequently.

- 93 Op.cit., p.37.
- 94 Credo Mtwā, uNosilimela, in South Africa's People's Plays by Kente, Mtwā, Shenzi and Workshop '71 selected by R.M. Kavanagh, London, Heinemann, 1981, pp.1-61. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 95 Gibson Kente, Too Late, in South African People's Plays, ibid., pp.85-123. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 96 Zakes Mda, Dead End, in We Shall Sing for the Fatherland and Other Plays by Zakes Mda, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1978, pp.45-66. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 97 Shebeen is the name given to the place where illicit liquor is sold in urban South Africa. The women who deal in illicit liquor are known as shebeen queens.
- 98 See, for example, 'A Deep Insight into the Loves and Hates of our People' in Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa by Robert Mushengu Kavanagh, London, Zed Books Ltd., 1985, pp.113-144 (p. 122).
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- 100 Lewis Nkosi, 'Sex and Politics in Southern African Literature' in Sheffield Papers on Literature and Society: Papers on African Literature (ed.) by Christopher Heywood, London, Multicopy, 1976, pp.1-12 (p.4).
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- 108 Athol Fugard, Nongogo, in Dimentos and two Early Plays by Athol Fugard, London, OUP, 1977, pp.55-115.
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- 110 A nongogo is a cheap prostitute in South Africa who solicits especially among the miners.
- 111 Op.cit., p.97.
- 112 Op.cit.
- 113 Ibid., p.123.
- 114 Ibid., pp.151-152.
- 115 Stephanie Urdang, 'A World Apart in Africa', in The Guardian, January 14th, 1985, p.8.
- 116 Athol Fugard, The Blood Knot, in Boesman and Lena and Other Plays by Athol Fugard, London, OUP, 1978, pp.1-97. All references and quotations are from this edition. The Blood Knot was originally published in 1963.
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- 118 Ibid., p.81.
- 119 Khayaalethu Mqayisa, Confused Mhlaba, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1974. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 120 Benjamin Leshoai, Lines Draw Monsters (Act I), in Contemporary South African Plays (ed.) by Ernest Pereira, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1977, pp.251-266. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 121 Ibid., p.258.
- 122 Ibid., p.259.

123 Ibid., p.265.

124 'Not Weeping Behind the Door', Ellen Kuzwayo interviewed by Wendy Davies on her book, Call Me Woman (London, Women's Press, 1985) in New Africa, January 1985, No.213, p.42. This view is expounded in Call Me Woman.

PART II

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN  
BY MAJOR PLAYWRIGHTS



## CHAPTER 4

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN BY MAJOR MALE PLAYWRIGHTS

This chapter examines the portrayal of women by eight major male playwrights. These are not only playwrights who have given considerable attention to the position of women in society and to women's issues, but they are also established creative writers in the dramatic genre.

In the course of the discussion, comparative observations are made between the representation of women by these male playwrights and that by the female playwrights examined in the next chapter. To facilitate this comparison, the chapter is divided into three sections corresponding to the sections in Chapter 5. These are, 'Women and Tradition': J.P. Clark (Bekederemo) and John Ruganda; 'Women, Social Change and Women's Liberation': Ebrahim Hussein, Francis Imbuga and Ibrahim Ngozi; 'Women in Politics and Cultural Development': Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Women and Tradition: J.P. Clark (Bekederemo) and John Ruganda

J.P. Clark Bekederemo (M) Nigeria:

The Masquerade 1964

Song of a Goat 1964

John Ruganda (M) Uganda:

Covenant with Death 1973

J.P. Clark (Bekederemo) has been involved in theatre in Nigeria as a playwright, critic and lecturer since the early 1960s. Clark's drama is based on the African traditional milieu. Clark strongly believes in the traditional African heritage as the foundation of modern African drama. About Nigerian drama, for example, he has the following to say:

Contrary to what some seem to think, Nigerian drama did not begin at the University of Ibadan. The roots go beyond there, and one hopes, they are more enduring than that. Very likely, they lie where they have been found among other peoples of the earth, deep in the past of the race ... /The/ origins of Nigerian drama /are/ likely to be found in the early religions and magical ceremonies and festivals of this country. The egungun and oro of the Yoruba, the egwugwu and mmo masques of the Ibo, and the owu and oru water masquerades of the Ijaw are dramas typical of the national repertory still generally unacknowledged today.<sup>1</sup>

John Ruganda is Uganda's leading contemporary playwright and one of East Africa's most committed theatre directors. From the mid-1970s, Ruganda was involved in the development of the University of Nairobi Travelling Theatre for almost a decade. As a playwright, Ruganda is interested in urban problems and also in how African traditional customs affect individuals and their social interaction with one another in contemporary Africa.

Although Clark believes in traditional African cultures as the basis of contemporary African drama he is by no means an admirer of tradition. He is critical of the way in which tradition tends to constrain the individual by insisting that one's behaviour fits into circumscribed roles. Indeed, the playwright seems fascinated by the

conflict between the individual and the community in which he or she lives. Most of Clark's early plays depend on the conflict between traditionalism and individualism as a dominant theme.

Clark is very much interested in women's position in the traditional milieu since here their freedom to act as individuals is curtailed more than that of the men. In The Masquerade<sup>2</sup> and Song of a Goat<sup>3</sup> he examines the conflict between traditionalism and individualism through Titi and Ebiere, respectively, who are too strong and too independent for their conservative traditional communities.

The Masquerade is based on a common narrative in African oral literature in which a beautiful girl delays her marriage, refusing all suitors, until eventually her life ends tragically due to her acceptance of the wrong suitor. This type of story is told to girls in a traditional milieu as a warning against delaying their marriage or refusing their parents' advice on who to marry. But from Clark's portrayal of his heroine, Titi, it would appear that his warning is not against her approach to the issue of marriage but against traditionalism.

Titi delays her marriage and eventually falls in love with Tufa, a stranger in her community. Titi's father, Diribi, welcomes Tufa and encourages his relationship with his daughter. Diribi judges Tufa from his wealth and good behaviour forgetting that background and lineage are important in determining a person's worth in the traditional social context. It is during the last celebration before the consummation of the marriage that Tufa's background is revealed. The



fact that Tufa was fathered by his uncle in traditionally unacceptable circumstances and that his mother died giving birth to him make him taboo and unworthy as a son-in-law.<sup>4</sup> On learning this background Diribi now rejects Tufa and a conflict arises between him and Titi to whom background is not as important as love.

The major conflict in The Masquerade is a conflict between traditionalism represented by Diribi on the one hand, and individualism and progressiveness represented by Titi on the other. From Clark's portrayal of the two characters it appears that he is more for individualism and progressiveness than traditionalism.

Titi has tremendous independence of thought and strength of will. She will not be persuaded to reject her chosen fiancé regardless of his background. She uses very strong arguments when her parents try to persuade her to desert Tufa:

Titi:       When I first brought him hand  
               In hand to you, then was the correct occasion  
               To question who the stranger was I had  
               Chosen for husband. But you not only failed  
               To find what his name was, you actually  
               Went the length of showering on him fresh, bright  
               Ones of your own making. More,  
               Right there in the presence of all friends and  
               The family gathered around, you  
               Invited us in with open arms and eyes  
               Full of dance ...  
               You called all the clan to witness  
               A union you said the soil herself must welcome  
               to sweet fruition ...

Diribi:     Titi, don't go dangling in my face the dagger  
               That in my ignorance and overflow  
               Of spirits I accepted as a fan of fine  
               Feathers.

Umuko:      Had you not kept us waiting

Longer than was natural? ...

Titi:        So that was why you little cared  
               Who at last I favoured? Was that why  
               Father was so insistant with his approval,  
               Waiving all talk of dowry?<sup>5</sup>

In this excerpt Titi reverses the situation and becomes judge placing her parents on the defensive instead of the other way round. Later in the play, Titi crushes her father's arguments by demanding an explanation as to why Tufa should suffer for wrongs committed before he was born.

Titi's rejection of her father's offer to sail with her from creek to creek in search of the best man for her indicates that she is against all negative traditional attitudes towards women. She will not be reduced to a commodity. Diribi cannot find an answer to the direct style in which Titi describes his offer. She describes it as putting her on sale, 'like fish or fowl rejected by the meanest household'.<sup>6</sup>

Diribi uses a beastly method to resolve the conflict between him and his daughter. He hunts Tufa and Titi like animals and eventually slaughters the latter in a most merciless way. The tragic death of Titi should be seen in the context of the position of strong independent-minded women in conservative traditional African communities. Titi's death is the fate of strong, independent women such as Anowa in Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa<sup>7</sup>. Conservative traditional African communities cannot cope with women like these heroines, perhaps because their strength and independence of thought exposes some of the weaknesses in these

cultures. It is with the intention of covering up their weaknesses that the agents of conservation in these communities treat such heroines as outcasts. Hence Old Woman dismisses Anowa as a witch while Diribi dismisses Titi as worse than a prostitute. Diribi cannot imagine that he who has always clung so rigidly to tradition could father a non-conformist girl:

Yet in what way have I done wrong  
 Except that the one who I took for my heart  
 Has turned out worse than a harlot. I have  
 Fathered maidens as well as male - all  
 By the labour of my loin - so that  
 The river that took root at the earth's  
 Deep centre, come drought come disease may never  
 Run out ... But Titi, Titi I loved  
 To think sat innocent between my laps and  
 Who I have hugged to myself as  
 A river laps an island, now seeks  
 To dam my path, even as I answer  
 The unavoidable call to sea.<sup>8</sup>

Diribi's murder of Titi is Clark's comment on the role of rigid traditionalism. It would appear the playwright's conclusion in The Masquerade is that conservative traditionalism serves the exact opposite of what culture is supposed to serve; that is, it devours a community's progressive individuals instead of encouraging them to contribute towards cultural development. Clark's choice of a woman to play the role of the progressive individual in this play demonstrates his respect for women and his belief that women do not deserve the traditional label of 'the weaker sex'.

In Song of a Goat<sup>9</sup> Clark examines the plight of an independent-minded and sensitive woman in a conservative African community. Clark bases this play on a wide-spread tradition in Africa whereby a woman



is passed over to her brother-in-law (or an appropriate male relative of her husband) in a case where her husband is unable to father children. Oyin Ogunba views this tradition as too commonplace to form the social background of serious drama. He implies this when he says:

The point of tradition being explored here is that a commonplace matter like this, namely the handing over of a wife to a virile younger brother by an impotent elder brother, is allowed to assume such tragic proportions. This is a normal practice in a number of tribes in Nigeria, although it is often kept secret by those involved. But a jealous brother may feel that his manhood is at stake and thereby lead himself into irredeemable action. Besides, part of the meaning of the incident is to be found in the complexity introduced by modernism itself, which is gradually making people individually important irrespective of the sequence of their birth.<sup>10</sup>

Ogunba's reservations on Clark's examination of this tradition's effects on his characters arises out of this critic's insensitivity to the predicament of the characters involved in this drama. On a broad communal level a tradition such as this one may be regarded as normal and satisfactory for all; but it is impossible for it not to have deep psychological effects on those who are involved directly and a person's idiosyncrasies will determine the degree of such effect.

Clark's portrayal of Ebieren is an attempt by the playwright to comment on the effect of this tradition on sensitive and independent minded women. It should be noted that this tradition depends on the reproductive role of women which, as discussed in Chapter 1, is taken very seriously in traditional African communities. Ebieren's sensitivity leads her to rebel against the idea of being passed over to her brother-in-law by the community. In order for the ceremony to be carried out,

Ebiere would have had to prove that her husband was impotent. This is something Ebiere could not do, owing to her love and concern for Zifa. This attitude is illustrated by the reason Ebiere gives the Masseur for failing to inform her parents about Zifa's impotence. She says, 'I do not want to hurt him'.<sup>11</sup> Her independence leads her into sleeping with Tonye before the necessary ritual has been carried out and thereby breaking a communal regulation while at the same time trying to satisfy her community's expectations of her as an adult woman whose role in marriage is to produce children.

Ebiere's frustration with her marriage is not sexual frustration as Margaret Laurence implies when she says, 'Ebiere grows more bitter, and then is drawn towards Tonye and their mock play scuffling is half anger, half sexual attraction'.<sup>12</sup> Much stronger than the sexual attraction Margaret Laurence refers to is Ebiere's desire to have a second child. She is torn between her love for her husband on the one hand, and the need to satisfy communal expectations on the other. The Masseur emphasizes the importance of the procreational role of a woman in this traditional community when he says, 'we fatten our maidens to prepare for fruition, / Not to thwart them'.<sup>13</sup>

Clark attempts to capture Ebiere's sense of fulfilment by making her speak in lyrical language the morning after her intercourse with Tonye. She speaks almost like someone in a trance and her behaviour is like that of a person who has been released from a long period of imprisonment. Notice that it is the possibility of having conceived which is foremost in her mind and not the fact of having had sexual

satisfaction as Laurence would have it. She tells Tonye:

It is there,  
All right, I know it, and it is for you. Oh,  
I am so happy. Tonye, let's fly  
And set up house in another creek. You'll  
Cast your net and I'll hold the stern until  
We have our child.<sup>14</sup>

The eventual death of Ebieri is similar to that of Titi in The Masquerade. Ebieri dies as a result of the impact in the conflict between her individuality and communal expectations in her conservative traditional society. Her death is what Clark views as the fate of sensitive and independent women living in rigid traditional communities.

There is a parallel between the portrayal of Ebieri and that of Matama in John Ruganda's Covenant With Death.<sup>15</sup> Ruganda's portrayal of Matama shows his sympathies for women in their procreational role in traditional Africa. Matama is barren and her barrenness is not of her own making. Matama's barrenness is rooted in an act her parents commit before she is born, that is, when they dedicate her to the goddess of fruition.

To evoke sympathies for his heroine, Ruganda uses the art of story-telling and allows Matama to tell her own story. The community's contempt for Matama is presented as adding insult to injury since her anxiety over the state of being barren causes her enough psychological torture. Notice her anxiety from the following excerpt of her story:

I was desperately in need of a harvesting season - I saw other girls of my age, even my juniors command more respect from the farmers. I saw them harvest as though their shambas\*

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\* Shamba - Kiswahili word for 'farm'.



were teeming with life. I felt as though my inside was made of dead wood. Dead, dry wood. My very inside was tormented by a deep wound, a wound I could not heal, a wound nobody could heal. It fermented and festered as time went by. The biting dug deeper and deeper as men passed me by - even my father's servants whenever they passed me, they could hardly look at me. They would walk a few steps off and spit in disgust.

Apart from helping convey the cultural atmosphere of the rural setting of this play, the use of agricultural imagery to describe human fertility helps bring out a contrast between the treatment of fertile women and the barren. In addition, it helps enhance the audience's sympathies for Matama. Notice also the significance of Matama's use of disease imagery. Her barrenness leads her into being ostracised by the community and treated like a person suffering from an infectious disease.

To understand fully the extent of Matama's psychological torture, it is important to understand the implication of the spitting of the servants as they pass her. The reason is two-fold. They spit out of scorn for the barren Matama as she is taken to be responsible for bringing about barrenness upon herself. Many African communities believe that barrenness is a punishment for an evil act committed by the victim. Secondly, the servants spit to avoid contamination. Barrenness is regarded as a curse, and in some communities interaction with a barren woman is feared as likely to cause disaster or infertility in other people or in their crops. Matama's beauty and youth are regarded as null and void, all because of her barrenness. This is implied by her statement, 'There I was hardly eighteen years old and

in their eyes I was worse than an old hag'.<sup>17</sup>

Ruganda traces Matama's alienation from her community and eventual death to tradition. The tragedy is a result of the community's inflexible traditionalism which condemns the barren women wholesale without considering their circumstances. There is an implied recognition of this weakness of tradition by the community from the reactions of two representatives from Matama's village after her death:

Bamura: Yes she is dead, dead, dead! ... Death in, death out, this our village is a butchery. Oh my Matama, my poor Matama ...

(She starts weeping and wailing ...)

Old Man: Oh multiplying evils! The curse has completed its circle. (Then to himself) The air is purged of wanton affinities, and the inherited debt paid by an unknowing child.<sup>18</sup>

Although Clark and Ruganda are equally sympathetic towards women in the traditional milieu in the plays examined here, their portrayal of women differs significantly. Clark's heroines are strong women in search of freedom in communities which are intolerant to strong independent women. In contrast to Titi and Ebriere, Ruganda's Matama is extremely passive. She is like Namuddu in Ruganda's Black Mamba<sup>19</sup> who is tossed between her husband and his employer and does not attempt to rebel against the humiliation of being used as a sex object by the two men. Covenant With Death leaves no doubt that Ruganda is questioning tradition, but the impression left by the heroine is that women like her contribute to the status quo by their lack of resistance.

The difference in the two playwrights' portrayal of women can be attributed to two factors. Clark's cultural background is a matrilineal one whereas that of Ruganda is patrilineal. It is no wonder then that the strength of Clark's two heroines matches that of Anowa in Ama Ata Aidoo's play<sup>20</sup> as the latter playwright also comes from a matrilineal society. Secondly, unlike Ruganda who seems to be experimenting with drama, Clark is a seasoned playwright and has definite stands when it comes to his portrayal of characters, male or female.

Women: Social Change and Women's Liberation: Ebrahim Hussein, Francis

Imbuga, Ibrahim Ngozi

Ebrahim Hussein (M) Tanzania: Alikiona (She had it) 1970  
Wakati Ukuta (Time is a wall) 1970

Francis Imbuga (M) Kenya: The Fourth Trial 1972  
The Married Bachelor 1973

Ibrahim Ngozi (M) Tanzania: Machochi ya Mwanamke (A woman's tears) 1977

Ebrahim Hussein is Tanzania's major male playwright. However, although Hussein has written numerous plays, only one of these plays (Kinjeketile)<sup>21</sup> is known internationally since it is the only one which has so far been translated into English. All his other plays are in Kiswahili. Hussein's early plays examine cultural changes in Tanzania at her contact with the West while his recent ones are based on the country's political development during the colonial and post-colonial periods.



Francis Imbuga is Kenya's most prolific playwright as well as one of the best actors in the country. As a writer, Imbuga started off with family drama before moving on to plays dealing with wider social issues. His more serious drama deals with problems of cultural change in Africa as well as political themes based on the post-independence African situation. His political play, Betrayal in the City<sup>22</sup> was one of Kenya's entries to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Nigeria in 1977.

Ibrahim Ngozi of Tanzania has written only one play to date, Machozi ya Mwanamke<sup>23</sup> (A woman's tears). Although he is not a major writer, Ngozi has been included in this chapter because his play deals with the issue of women's liberation in Africa, an area which has attracted very few playwrights.

This section examines the portrayal of women by major male writers in the context of cultural changes and in the context of women's liberation in Africa.

In his early drama, Ebrahim Hussein is very sensitive to the cultural problems arising in Tanzania as a result of urbanization. Although Hussein recognizes that cultural changes are inevitable, he does not discuss the problems inherent in these changes in a way which would indicate his understanding of the predicaments of the characters who are caught in the turmoil of social change. Hussein is particularly hard on women in their response to these changes, as illustrated by his treatment of his female characters in Wakati Ukuta<sup>24</sup> (Time is a wall)

and Alikiona<sup>25</sup> (She had it).

In Wakati Ukuta Hussein presents the older generation of women as too ignorant and too conservative for the changing times as compared with the men of their generation who approach cultural changes with an open mind. His portrayal of Mama Tatu is as negative as that of Sadiku in Wole Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel.<sup>26</sup> Like Sadiku, Mama Tatu is presented as a left-over from an earlier age.

While Baba Tatu understands that cultural changes are inevitable and feels that parents should therefore wean their children gradually through the process of cultural change, Mama Tatu rigidly sticks to the same tradition in which she was brought up years ago. She sees no reason why her daughter should not go through the same denial of freedom she underwent, for example in the issue of the choice of a husband. She tells Tatu:

Mimi nimelelewa na wazee wangu nilipokuwa mkubwa wakanipa mume. Sikumjua, hakunijua, lakini mpaka sasa tunakaa vema. Nami nitakufanyia hivyo hivyo. Mpaka nikupe nyumba yako halafu hapo tena shauri yako.<sup>27</sup>

(I grew up under my parents' supervision; when I became an adult they chose my husband for me. I didn't know him, he didn't know me, but up to now we have lived happily together. And I shall do for you exactly the same. You will wait until I give you your home, after that you can do as you wish.)<sup>28</sup>

Mama Tatu's uncompromising attitude towards cultural changes culminates in her act of disowning her daughter when the latter attends a film without her permission. This is an extreme measure, especially when one considers that among many African peoples, the punishment of disowning a child is meted out only in those rare cases

where the culprit has committed an evil which only the supernatural powers can handle.

Baba Tatu's level-headed approach to the changing times as a contrast to Mama Tatu's amplifies the woman's ignorance.

Sisi hatukuwa kama wazee wetu. Basi na hawa watoto wetu vile vile. Wanasoma kizungu, tunawavalisha kizungu, wanakwenda shuleni kusoma kizungu ... Hakuna mtu anaweza kushindana na wakati. WAKATI UKUTA, UKIPIGANA NAO UTAUMIA MWENYEWE.<sup>29</sup>

(We were not like our parents. It is the same with these children of ours. They are learning English ways, we dress them in English clothes, they go to school to learn English and English culture ... Nobody can compete with time. TIME IS A WALL, IF YOU TRY TO HIT IT YOU INJURE YOURSELF.)

Where the older woman is portrayed as an extremist in her conservatism, the younger is presented as an extremist in her haste to embrace western ways and in her choice of what aspects of western culture to assimilate. Tatu assimilates superficialities of the new culture thoughtlessly and hurriedly. It is in this spirit that she elopes with a man she hardly knows and gets into trouble when the man begins to cheat on her immediately after the marriage.

Hussein's criticism against women's approach to cultural change seems to stem from prejudice rather than from a genuine attempt to help women adapt to changing times. There is a clear difference, for example, between Hussein's attitude in Wakati Ukuta and that of Ama Ata Aidoo in Anowa<sup>30</sup> and Penina Muhando in Hatia<sup>31</sup> (Guilty). Where Hussein's criticism of Mama Tatu appears as wholesale criticism of women's ignorance in cultural change, Aidoo criticizes Old Woman and Badua as elements in society whose conservatism is a hindrance to



women's search for freedom and independence. In this vein Anowa's rebellion is shown to be a search for freedom and not hasty and thoughtless embracing of new values as in the case of Tatu. Aidoo's sympathies are with Anowa, but Hussein has sympathies for neither Mama Tatu nor Tatu. He is as detached as Soyinka in The Lion and the Jewel.<sup>32</sup>

In Alikiona Hussein's representation of women in the urban area as a new social environment differs significantly from that of Muhando in Hatia. In the latter play, Muhando examines Cheja's behaviour against the social background of the urban area as a new phenomenon in Tanzania; in other words, she takes this female character's response to the urban situation as a direct result of the conflict between the workings of the latter environment and those of the rural area where Cheja was brought up. In view of this background, Cheja's pregnancy is seen, not as an indication of promiscuity on her part, but as the repercussion of being forced to interact with sophisticated strangers in the urban environment using her rural simplicity and sense of community to one's neighbours which are out of place in the urban situation.

In Alikiona, on the other hand, Hussein does not consider the strains and stresses Saida is exposed to, issuing from living and working conditions which are different from those one is used to in the rural environment. The playwright manipulates his heroine to fit into a preconceived idea that urban women are promiscuous.

The playwright assumes the attitude of a prosecutor and refuses

to see that living in a new environment where one's neighbour is not necessarily one's relative or friend as in the rural area places a woman whose husband works night shifts in a lonely and vulnerable situation. If this social background was given some emphasis in the play, it would persuade the audience to understand (though not necessarily condone) Saida's involvement in an extra-marital affair. The picture we get of Saida at the moment is that of a naughty wife who engages in this relationship for the sheer fun of it. We are even invited to share in the playwright's sadistic humour when Saida is being tortured by her husband through psychological punishment. Saida is a typical stereotyped urban female character in a male-chauvinistic playwright's work.

In The Fourth Trial<sup>33</sup> Imbuga assumes a similar attitude towards Sophie ~~to~~ that of Hussein towards his heroine Saida. Imbuga denies Sophie the kind of social background and development of character which would help the audience understand the urban problems which led her into prostitution. Sophie is not important as a character in her own right except in relation to the hero. Her importance is only to establish that the hero sleeps with prostitutes; once this has been noted, Sophie is given a terminal exit after appearing in only one brief scene. Apart from the brevity of her appearance in the play, the presentation of Sophie only in the context of her interaction with a customer denies her the chance of coming through as a real human being. Her lack of seriousness about life, coupled with her sense of irresponsibility leaves us with the picture of a woman who sails in

and out of life scenes at the fast speed in which she moves in and out of this play. This playwright's lack of sensitivity to urban women's problems leads the audience to make unfair judgement on this character.

The second part of this section discusses male playwrights' attitude towards African women's struggle for liberation. The issue of women's liberation has received negligible attention from playwrights. Perhaps the explanation for this is the usual lack of interest in matters which are predominantly for women.

Plays by male writers who have touched on the issue of women's liberation are characterized by scepticism and cynicism. Unlike female playwrights such as Penina Muhando who criticize with the intention of inspiring women to work hard for their emancipation, their male counterparts criticize with the aim of proving how difficult it is for women to liberate themselves. This is an attitude which arises from male chauvinism.

In The Married Bachelor<sup>34</sup>, Francis Imbuga is not only sceptical about the Women's Liberation Movement, he is also cynical towards it. This is revealed by his portrayal of Mary, a leader of the Women's Liberation Movement in Kenya. Mary is a victim of male oppression arising from men's attempts to exploit changing moral values while at the same time reaping the fruits of traditionalism. In this social change, men do not consider the pressures they exert on women when they expect them to satisfy both the traditional and the modern milieux even at points where the two seem to be contradictory to each other.



Mary is victimized for her pregnancies as an unmarried woman in her friendship with Henry and, later, Denis. As observed in Chapter 1, among many peoples of Africa women are expected to be chaste before and after marriage. Proof of virginity is a requirement at marriage. Pregnancy or having a baby before marriage is considered a sure proof that a woman is not chaste. But during the transition between tradition and modernity many men who consider themselves modern take advantage of social change and expect their girl-friends to sleep with them before marriage. However, there is a tendency to discard these young women as soon as the men responsible discover that they are pregnant. The same men argue that these women are unclean. This is the fate of Mary in The Married Bachelor. Mary is rejected twice by Henry and once by Denis on account of pregnancy before marriage.

The attitude taken by Denis on hearing that Mary has had a child represents the attitude of most of these so-called modern men in similar situations. Notice this from the excerpt quoted below:

- Mary:       ... I am just amazed at how very similar the two of us are.
- Denis:       What do you mean?
- Mary:       I, too, have a child. (Denis is surprised.)
- Denis:       A child? ... I want to know where this son of yours is, who his father is, and why the two of you are not married.
- Mary:       But you appear upset. Surely you should not be. Is it not the same case as yours?
- Denis:       Who says it is? You are a woman, I am a man. You once have been pregnant, I haven't. Do you still believe us to be similar?

Mary: But the basic facts are the same.

Denis: ... What you fail to realize is that biologically a woman is dangerously handicapped. This calls for more restriction of her physical desires. Women must exercise greater control over themselves if they are to retain their dignity in society. Right now yours, if you had any, has vanished into thin air.<sup>35</sup>

If Imbuga is critical of the kind of attitude Denis represents, it is not clear from the play. The playwright makes Denis appear innocent in comparison with Mary. For example, the child he gets before his relationship with Mary is given legitimacy in the sense that he was married. Imbuga is keen to emphasize Denis's innocence. The latter is said not to have 'touched or smiled at any other woman',<sup>36</sup> until he met Mary. Mary, on the other hand, is said to have slept with Denis the very first day the two met, her previous experience with Henry notwithstanding.

Imbuga's portrayal of Mary shows his scepticism about the emancipation of African women. Mary is shown to contribute a great deal towards her oppression by men. Besides her gullibility, Mary has a very negative self-perception. The presentation of Mary's attitude towards herself weighed against the fact that she is supposed to be a woman liberator raises the question of the playwright's own attitude towards women and it makes one wonder whether the entire picture of this heroine is not a reflection of Imbuga's male chauvinism.

Mary does not live for herself but for the men with whom she is in love. When she is in love with Henry she gives herself wholly to him, and later, when she falls in love with Denis her approach is the

same. Having been rejected once on account of pregnancy by a man she trusted fully, Mary would be expected to be more cautious in her relationship with Denis. But, not only does she give herself fully to him, she goes as far as carrying his baby. After she is rejected by Denis she accepts Henry's proposal without considering that he might one day betray her as he did the first time or as Denis has just betrayed her. Mary's acceptance of Henry's proposal immediately after her rejection by Denis is an indication that she neither respects herself enough to object to the idea of being tossed from man to man, nor is she strong enough to stand on her own feet.

The kind of language Mary uses to describe herself is significant as a further illustration of her negative self-perception. For example, after her rejection by Denis, instead of viewing this as the man's oppression towards her, she blames herself calling herself 'the refuse of society' and 'nature's disgrace'<sup>37</sup>. Mary's weaknesses and negative attitude towards herself raise doubts on her suitability as a leader of a women's liberation movement. The first step towards emancipation either of oneself or of others is psychological liberation. Mary is very far from attaining this stage.

The contradictory nature of Mary's character suggests two possibilities. If the contradiction is accidental, then it shows the playwright's problem as a male writer: his male chauvinism hinders him from portraying a credible woman liberator. On the other hand, if Mary's portrayal is deliberate, then the playwright emerges as a sceptical cynic who wonders how women can liberate themselves while



they behave in a manner which invites men to oppress them.

Even when a male writer is genuinely concerned in contributing to the emancipation of women, unconscious scepticism about the success of women's efforts can still be observed. In the preface to his play, Ibrahim Ngozi says that he wrote Machizi ya Mwanamke<sup>38</sup> (A woman's tears) in response to the aims of the International Women's Year (1975) and as a contribution to women's liberation. In spite of the fact that Ngozi's intentions for writing this play are pro-women and that he is critical of male oppression on women, the playwright nonetheless betrays his scepticism towards women's ability to emancipate themselves from this oppression.

Ngozi's presentation of the plight of women in a changing African society shows his great sympathies for women. He bases his play on rural Tanzania where the introduction of cash crops enhances men's treatment of women as beasts of burden. Wives of men who are greedy for money are viewed as cheap labour for the cultivation of these crops and they are not allowed to enjoy the fruits of their work.

Madahiro, the protagonist of Machizi ya Mwanamke, marries women as if he is buying beasts of burden and treats them like objects. The wives have no rights either in the home or to the money obtained from the tobacco sales. Madahiro views these wives as disposable and the playwright attributes this attitude to two things. First, there is the boom of the wealth gained from the new cash crops. Secondly there is the problem of taking advantage of the bride price system which reduces women to objects. Notice Madahiro's attitude from his outburst below:

(Anazipigapiga fedha zake mfukoni) Ha! ha! ha! Ndiyo zipo. Noti chungu mzima ... Nikitaka kuoa mke mwingine tena, sasa hivi ninaweza. Hata waseme mahari kiasi gani, saa hiyo hiyo ... Dakika hiyo hiyo ... Ninatoa ... Wangapi wanaweza hivyo hapa Isikizya?<sup>39</sup>

((He puts his money in the pocket) Ha! ha! ha! Yes it is there. Lots of money ... If I wanted to marry another wife just now I could. Even if they demanded a huge dowry, this hour ... this minute ... I would pay ... How many people can manage that here in Isikizya?)

Ngozi seems unsure as to what type of efforts women should make in order to liberate themselves from male oppression and in his presentation of possible solutions he betrays his scepticism towards women's liberation efforts. As the play progresses the author appears more and more unsure about the steps Madahiro's wives should take to liberate themselves. Their first step, that of ganging up and beating their husband almost to death is not only ludicrous but also it has counter-productive results. It only angers Madahiro and ignites him with fire to oppress even harder any of his wives who come back or those he marries in future so that they can repay for his humiliation.

Having the situation handled by the village officials is the most ridiculous of these steps. The village officials are all men and, unlike Penina Muhando in Heshima Yangu<sup>40</sup> (My honour), Ngozi does not see that the mere fact of occupying an official position does not automatically erase an individual's male-chauvinistic attitude towards women. Indeed, the officials in Machizi ya Mwanamke betray their male-chauvinistic and selfish attitude in the way in which they handle the case. Each one of them seems very sensitive to any personal loss he may incur should Madahiro's type of situation extend to his home.

None of the officials tries to put himself in Madahiro's wives' position.

Ngozi fails to see that the root cause of these women's problem is economic dependence. As long as the women have no ownership rights to the land they till, they will be forced to take their places back at Madahiro's home, if only to have some means of bringing up their children. The man is very right when he boasts that he knows the women will go to him begging to be accepted back. This situation reduces the women's proclamation of having liberated themselves into an empty song.

Unlike Muhando in Nguzo Mama<sup>41</sup>, Ngozi does not attempt to get to the core of some of the major problems facing African women in their emancipation. Although the issues Ngozi raises in Machozi ya Mwanamke indicate his sensitivity to African women's oppression, his handling of possible solutions is tainted with so much scepticism that the whole play leaves the audience with the feeling that African women's efforts for liberation are doomed to futility.

Women in Politics and Cultural Development: Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Femi Osofisan (M) Nigeria:	<u>The Chattering and the Song</u> 1977 <u>Morontodoun</u> 1982
Wole Soyinka (M) Nigeria:	<u>A Dance of the Forests</u> 1963 <u>Kongi's Harvest</u> 1967 <u>Madmen and Specialists</u> 1971



Ngugi wa Thiong'o (M) Kenya: This Time Tomorrow undated, original script ?1967  
Mother Sing for Me undated ?1982

Femi Osofisan is the most committed of the younger generation of Nigerian playwrights after Clark and Soyinka. His drama differs from that of his predecessors; it portrays overt Marxist inclination.

Osofisan implies this leftist ideological standpoint when he says:

For a long time, we are closed to the left, the socialist countries. We just don't know anything about them. If you can be aware of several options open to development then you will want to spread it.<sup>41</sup> The theatre is one of the ways of spreading information.

Wole Soyinka is one of the leading contemporary African creative writers. In the area of drama he is considered as the father of the modern African theatre in English and the major influence on the younger African playwrights. He has written about twenty playscripts and several critical works on literature. It is in recognition of his literary stature that Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.

The major problems with Soyinka as a creative writer are his ambivalence and his pessimistic view of life. Critics of African literature and even fellow-African writers have taken Soyinka to task over his emphasis on the negative side of life and how it affects the ideological direction of his plays.<sup>43</sup> The playwright defends his position thus:

Yes, the antinomies in my writings. But are these not a reflection of the human condition? Nobody can say that he has never been through moments of intense pain or pessimism, whether on a very private level, or even of viewing what I have termed a 'recurrent cycle of stupidities', an expression

which distresses those who want human existence to be so obviously and patently without any qualifications optimistic ... But the human spirit constantly overrides the negative side of it, not always, but those who inspire us ultimately are those who succeed in overcoming the moment of despair ... It is there, tragedy exists in human life and I do not believe that the function of the writer is to ignore the tragic aspect of human experience, that tragic face of truth.<sup>44</sup>

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is Kenya's most renowned creative writer. He is a novelist, a playwright, a literary critic and a political thinker. Ngugi's writings are based on his strong belief that literature cannot be divorced from politics. He says:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.<sup>45</sup>

Wole Soyinka's portrayal of women is insensitive and chauvinistic. This playwright has a very patriarchal attitude which makes him view women only in terms of their contributions to his heroes' experiences rather than as individual characters in their own right. In addition, Soyinka's view of the world has a significant relationship with his portrayal of women. He views the world as dominated by two opposing forces; viz., the creative and the destructive. Very often, Soyinka portrays women as embodiments of these two forces with the destructive aspect dominating the creative. If Si Bero and the earth mothers in Madmen and Specialists<sup>46</sup> devote themselves to the protection of life, their positive contribution is outweighed by the image of woman as a

destroyer which emerges from the portrayal of Rola and Segi in A Dance of the Forests<sup>47</sup> and Kongi's Harvest<sup>48</sup>, respectively.

In Madmen and Specialists Soyinka identifies the female principle with the protection of life while he identifies the male with cannibalism and destruction of life. Where Bero's present major preoccupation is destruction of life, that of Iya Mate, Iya Agba and Si Bero is devotion to the protection of life. The old women teach Si Bero the discipline behind life-protecting herbs and it is this commitment to life which acts as a link between Si Bero and the earth mothers on the one hand, and as an opposing force between her and her brother on the other. Notice this opposing force at work in the following dialogue where Bero and Si Bero speak at cross purposes:

Si Bero: Oh! how thoughtless I was. But they will be disappointed.

Bero: Who will?

Si Bero: Our neighbours. All your old patients.

Bero: Corpses.

Si Bero: What? I said your old patients.

Bero: I said corpses. Oh, forget it.

Si Bero: I can't. (She scans his face anxiously.) They haven't forgotten you.

Bero: They still exist, do they?

Si Bero: (again puzzled) Who? I don't understand.

Bero: I'm tired. Let's talk of something else ...

Si Bero: I like to keep close to earth.

Bero: (stepping back to prevent her from taking off his



boots.) Bare feet, wet earth. We've wetted your  
good earth<sup>49</sup> with something more potent than that,  
you know.

Si Bero's eventual rejection of her brother is a rejection of the latter's new philosophy of cannibalism and destruction of human life.

The question which arises in connection with Soyinka's portrayal of Si Bero and the earth mothers is whether this positive representation of women is indicative of the playwright's overall attitude towards women. Considering Soyinka's negative portrayal of women in his other plays, his representation of women in Madmen and Specialists cannot be taken as indicating a general stand of the playwright. This portrayal has to be taken in the socio-historical context of the play. Madmen and Specialists was written during Soyinka's bitter disillusionment with the Nigerian society and his subsequent pessimism towards human beings arising from his detention and especially from the Biafran War in Nigeria.\* His portrayal of women as representing the life principle while the men represent cannibalism and destruction of human life is merely the playwright's statement against the war. Soyinka saw the way people butchered one another in that war as a form of cannibalism because so many lives were wasted without justification. It was the men who were the majority of fighters, hence their representation as cannibals through Bero. The women are represented by characters dedicated to the preservation of life because they were the ones who had given birth to and nurtured the people killed in that war and hence the majority of those who bore the brunt of the effects of the war.

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\* The Biafran War was a post-independence civil war in Nigeria which lasted from 1966 to 1970. Soyinka was detained from Aug. 1967 to Oct. 1969.

It is A Dance of the Forests and Kongi's Harvest which really illustrate Soyinka's attitude towards women in their political role.

Madame Tortoise or Rola is portrayed as fickle and extremely callous with human lives. Where Si Bero in Madmen and Specialists opposes Bero's destruction of life, Rola is presented as the catalyst or temptress who influences Mata Kharibu to handle people in a cruel manner and to destroy lives wantonly. Rola's existence as a woman has always depended on the death of others. The world is littered with the corpses of her lovers for whose deaths she has been responsible.

Rola's act of ordering the castration of the captain who refuses to go to war to recover her trousseau is significant in showing not only her heartlessness but her negation of life. To Rola, who views people in superficial terms only, this act is merely a mutilation of a tool of pleasure; but on a deeper level, this castration is the annihilation of the potential for the growth of human life. This is the link between the castration of the captain and the death of his wife at a time when she carries his child. It is no wonder then the Dead Woman concludes that Rola 'had no womb'<sup>50</sup>. Eldred Jones has the following conclusion to make about Rola:

About all that can be said for Rola in either existence is that she shows some appreciation of art. She is not quite the Philistine that Adenebi is in this regard ... This quality in Rola would not have been worth mentioning had not art and the appreciation of art as an index of moral sensitiveness been so important in Soyinka's work ... She is certainly capable of redemption and is thus nearer to the most sensitive of the three human protagonists, Demoke.<sup>51</sup>

Contrary to Jones's contention, Rola is not capable of redemption



nor is there any intention on the part of the playwright to present her as such. What appears to Jones as her appreciation of art is merely her appreciation of the human world purely on the physical level. How else could she have led so many men to their death? This is apparent from what she says to the warrior:

Torture! I have cause to torture you. Did you know the one who fell from the roof? The one who leapt to his death, on my account? ... He would not understand that I took him, just as I select a new pin every day. He came back again and could not understand why the door was barred to him. He was such a fool.<sup>52</sup>

Rola's name, Madame Tortoise, is not accidental. It is taken from the African oral tradition. In many West African folktales Tortoise is a character who represents the ruse and the trickster in human beings just like Hare in East African oral narratives. Rola is a schemer. Her role in politics is to use her position and her charm for her own selfish ends; it does not matter to her if human lives are lost merely to satisfy her whims.

A difference can be discerned between male playwrights' view of feminine beauty and female playwrights' view of the same. Like Kenneth Watene in Dedan Kimathi<sup>53</sup>, Soyinka sees women as using their beauty for personal and selfish ends in which they will even use this charm to destroy those who stand between them and their set purposes. In contrast women playwrights, for example Micere Mugo and Efua Sutherland, view women as using their charm in the course of social development. Woman in Mugo and Ngugi's The Trial of Dedan Kimathi<sup>54</sup> uses her beauty and charm to distract the enemy in the workers' revolutionary struggle while Foriwa in Sutherland's Foriwa<sup>55</sup> uses hers to win the co-operation



of men in community developmental projects. Perhaps what accounts for this difference is the tendency for men to view feminine beauty only in physical terms while women tend to see it as a complement to a woman's total personality.

The relationship between Rola and Dead Woman represents Soyinka's view of the relationship between the destructive and the creative force in the cosmos. From the playwright's emphasis in this work, it would appear that he views the destructive force in women as more dominant than the creative force. Rola dominates the Dead Woman not only in her importance as a character in the play, but also in terms of the political power she commands. It is Rola's castration of the Dead Woman's husband which causes Dead Woman to commit suicide during her pregnancy. This death, taking place at a most productive moment in a woman's life, shows the extent to which Soyinka sees the destructive power in women as smothering the creative force and thus destroying hope of a balance in the world. This relationship between the creative force and the destructive is examined further in Kongi's Harvest<sup>56</sup> through the character of Segi.

Segi is perhaps Soyinka's heroine who has attracted the greatest critical attention, but also the one who has been most misunderstood. Many critics implicitly admit experiencing difficulties in coming to grips with this woman's character, as illustrated by two of these critics. Eldred Jones has the following to say about Segi:

Segi herself, a complex character, but unmistakable for her utter femininity, is an embodiment of the life principle ... Segi is another of Soyinka's extraordinary women ... Her

attraction is certain and total ... Segi is an embodiment of sex and hence potentially at least of the creative principle.<sup>57</sup>

Oyin Ogunba finds her mysterious. He says:

As one thinks more and more of Segi her personality becomes more mysterious and uncanny. Perhaps this is the reason why she is compared with agbadu (black, glistening snake) and mammy water. She has comely features and her blackness becomes her, a rich, black hue of a truly African woman. Like the agbadu snake she is an adumaadan (a woman with glossy black colour). But she is also a woman of extremes of temper, who turns ferocious when she is angry. (The agbadu snake is known for violent speed and sudden fatal attack.)<sup>58</sup>

The reason why these critics colour their observations with a great deal of verbiage is that they are afraid of making a straightforward admission of the fact that Soyinka's portrayal of Segi reflects this playwright's negative attitude towards women.

Soyinka's portrayal of Segi shows the playwright's attitude towards women as beings who combine the creative and the destructive power, but in such a way that the destructive force devours the creative potential. In other words, Segi is another Madame Tortoise. Danlola's warning to Daodu against associating with Segi sums up her character. He says:

... A - ah, you have picked yourself  
A right cannibal of the female species ...  
... Tell me, do you  
Know that woman's history? I have myself  
Wandered round some dens of Esu, once,  
And clambered over sweet hillocks  
In the dark, and not missed my way. But  
Daodu, that woman of yours, she scares  
The pepper right up the nostrils  
Of your old man here. She has left victims  
On her path like sugar cane pulp  
Squeezed dry.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from the power of her charm, Segi has political power gained

from her associations with politicians and her popular night-club. However, Segi is not portrayed as a woman who has any political ideology. Her association with politicians is not out of a commitment towards her nation; it is based on purely selfish motives. She admits that her association with Kongi was for prestige purposes when she says, 'Kongi was a great man, and I loved him'.<sup>60</sup>

No critic has attempted to analyse Segi's political contribution to Isma. Even when Jones talks about Segi being an embodiment of the life principle the observation is merely on a metaphysical level; he does not attempt to see what exactly Soyinka is saying about women's political contributions.<sup>61</sup> Segi leaves Kongi impotent at the end of their relationship. If indeed she was expected to be a true embodiment of the life principle would she not have left a more positive mark on the leader? Soyinka's attitude here is similar to that reflected in A Dance of the Forests. Just as Rola destroys life by the castration of the warrior and the death of his pregnant wife, so does Segi murder the creative potential in Kongi by leaving him impotent. If Segi indeed was supposed to be an embodiment of the life principle, where is the mother in her and why are men so afraid of being smothered by her charm? Danlola is not the only man who is afraid of Segi. The Organizing Secretary is terrified of her. The night-club layabouts find her mysterious and the songs they sing about her emphasize the destructive potential they find in her. They describe her as an agbadu, a serpent whose attack on human beings is lethal.<sup>62</sup> Segi is neither an embodiment of the life principle as Jones suggests, nor is she an embodiment



of the role of women in revolutionary struggle as Davies suggests. In her essay, 'Maidens, Mistresses and Matrons: Feminine Images in Selected Soyinka Works', Carole Davies makes the following conclusion about Segi's character:

As a character, Segi embodies the role of women in revolutionary struggle. This is so because Soyinka was able to effect a balance in the projection of Segi and to direct her quality of danger into a positive channel. There is a tremendous amount of energy in the Segi character. Although colored by myth, she endangers not the man she loves but the deserving agents of oppression ... By making Segi a courtesan and an organizer of prostitutes and Daodu a farmer and an organizer of farmers, in Kongi Soyinka toys with the notion of class struggle and suggests a revolutionary potential for both groups.<sup>63</sup>

Unlike true female participants in revolutionary struggles, Segi's relationship with men is on selfish and sexual lines. It is not out of need to cooperate with men in the task of liberating or developing a society. After Kongi, Segi befriends Daodu for selfish reasons. Apart from using Daodu to revenge on Kongi for the misunderstanding in their former love-relationship and for having imprisoned her father, Segi befriends Daodu for prestige and sexual reasons. Daodu is an educated prince and Danlola's heir apparent. He is also very virile and Segi is shown to put her exploitation of this virility above their public responsibilities.

This is illustrated by her dialogue with Daodu during the preparations for the New Year Festival:

Segi: I want to dance on gbegbe leaves; I know now I have not been forgotten.

Daodu: I'll rub your skin in camwood, you'll be flames at the hide of night.

Segi: Come with me Daodu.

Daodu: Now? There is still much to do before you meet us at the gates.

Segi: Come through the gates tonight. Now. I want you in me, my Spirit of Harvest.

Daodu: Don't tempt me so hard. I am swollen like prize yam under earth, but all harvest must await its season.

Segi: There is no season for seeds bursting.

Daodu: My eyes of kernels, I have much preparation to make.

Segi: I shall help you.

Daodu: Segi, between now and tomorrow's eve, I must somehow obtain some rest.

Segi: Let me tire you a little more.

Daodu: You cannot know how weary I am ... A child could sneeze me off my legs with a little pepper.

Segi: I must rejoice, and you with me. I am opened tonight. I am soil from the final rains.

Daodu: Promise you won't keep me long. I still have to meet my troublesome king.

Segi: Only a bite, of your Ismite ...

Daodu: Oh Segi! I had thought tonight at least, I would keep my head.<sup>64</sup>

The worst aspect of Soyinka's portrayal of Segi is his presentation of her as a sex symbol. Indeed this is the point which illustrates Soyinka's low opinion of women in their political role. Soyinka's presentation of Segi as a rotating mistress of the political leaders of Isma illustrates his view that women can never be committed to political endeavours except as sex objects of the male politicians.

The sexual relationship between Segi and Daodu is emphasized at the expense of their political comradeship. This is another point of contrast between Soyinka's female characters and those of women playwrights. Where Segi and Daodu are presented as related first and foremost by the lust for each other's bodies, Foriwa and Labaran in Efua Sutherland's Foriwa<sup>65</sup> are linked by their shared ideological concerns about the development of their society. In the case of Segi and Daodu, their political affiliation is cheapened by too much emphasis on their sexual relationship.

Although in his drama Femi Osofisan draws on his Yoruba cultural heritage just like Soyinka and he is influenced to some extent by the older playwright, there is a significant difference in the two playwrights' portrayal of women. Where Soyinka's women characters cannot be categorized into an ideological framework, Osofisan's heroines are the product of this writer's view about women's participation in revolutionary struggles. Osofisan uses drama as a tool for examining the masses' role in the African post-independence class struggles. He sees women's contribution to these struggles as crucial. Osofisan examines women's role in revolutionary struggles in two of his plays, Morontodoun<sup>66</sup> and The Chattering and the Song.<sup>67</sup>

In Morontodoun Osofisan recreates the myth of the Yoruba Queen Moremi of Ile-Ife who used her tact and courage to spy on an enemy Igbo army. The playwright reworks this myth to give his views on present-day class struggles in Africa. In this play women are very positively portrayed and this is due to Osofisan's socialist inclination. Women



are seen, not just as wives and mothers but as important members of the oppressed class whose contributions to the revolutionary struggle are essential.

Osofisan's belief in collective participation is shown in the way in which women are involved in what is going on instead of being relegated to the background. Three female characters are used to show the capability and commitment of women in the struggle. Two minor characters, the peasant women Mosun and Wura are shown to put personal considerations secondary to the aims of the struggle when one rejects her father and the other her husband for betraying the cause of the people.

It is through Titubi that Osofisan clearly indicates his view of women's participation in a revolutionary struggle. The difference between the portrayal of Soyinka's Segi and Osofisan's Titubi is too obvious to miss. Where Segi appears not much more than a sex mate for male political figures and does not develop as an autonomous character, Titubi is presented within the framework of her author's views of revolutionary struggles and she has a definite character development in her political thinking.

Titubi starts off as a spoilt child of the wealthy president of the market women's union. In this position, she can only join in the revolutionary struggle on the side of the oppressors against the masses. It is at this stage she identifies with Moremi and goes to spy on the peasants for the state. Her act is not based on any ideological stand; it is for fame more than for anything else that she

decides to work for the state. The ease and love of adventure with which Titubi goes to spy for the state illustrates Osofisan's view about wealth in the context of a revolutionary struggle. Though wealth per se is not an evil, the playwright views it as something that impairs the vision of the rich and prevents them from seeing the plight of the masses. This kind of blindness can be noticed most clearly in Titubi's mother when she argues, 'It's a lie! No one has ever died of hunger in this country! I am surprised at you, a police officer, carrying this kind of baseless propaganda'.<sup>68</sup> It is not surprising then that Titubi would find fun in spying on the peasants since she cannot imagine problems which would lead to their uprising.

While living with the peasants Titubi begins to understand their plight and eventually joins in their struggle against oppression. Her rejection of Moremi as a model for her is significant to show her development of character and her commitment to the struggle. She says:

And that was it. I knew at last that I had won. I knew I had to kill the ghost of Moremi in my belly. I am not Moremi! Moremi served the State, was the State, was the spirit of the ruling class.<sup>69</sup> But it is not true that the State is always right ...

Titubi's rejection of Moremi as a model is the climax of her development of character and marks a turning point in her life. Where she had previously looked at life from the perspective of what she could gain from it on a personal level, she is now prepared to work for the welfare of a community. It is after this that she decides to live among the peasants and contribute to their struggle, thus forfeiting the prestige and comfort of her mother's wealth.

Although Titubi's character illustrates Osofisan's belief in women's contribution to a revolutionary struggle, a difference can be discerned between his portrayal of revolutionary women and that by female playwrights. Where female playwrights emphasize women's independence, Osofisan does not. Titubi's marriage to Marshal is really unnecessary for the development of her commitment to the struggle and also considering that the latter leaves shortly after the celebration of the marriage to devote his life to fighting. Women characters by major female playwrights are seen to commit themselves to revolutionary struggles or to communal development without necessarily having to be coupled with men. For example, neither Woman nor Girl in Ngugi and Mugo's The Trial of Dedan Kimathi<sup>70</sup> is married to any of the freedom fighters and yet their commitment to their particular struggle is unquestionable. Similarly, Cheja in Penina Muhando's Hatia<sup>71</sup> is not paired off with a man when she decides to contribute to communal development by going to live in an ujamaa\* village.

While Osofisan does indicate that he believes in the importance of women's contribution to revolutionary struggles, it appears as if he cannot envisage a woman participating fully in a political struggle in her own right as an individual independently of a male mentor. This attitude is demonstrated more directly in The Chattering and the Song.<sup>72</sup>

Like Morontodoun, The Chattering and the Song is based on Osofisan's views on class struggles. Here again, the playwright sees

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\* ujamaa villages are communal units introduced with Tanzania's move to the left after the 'Arusha Declaration' of 1967.



the need for co-operation between men and women. Although Osofisan highlights the need for this co-operation and views women as capable participants, he depicts them as ideologically too weak and too dependent on their male comrades.

Funlola, for example, is an artist and she is used by Osofisan to discuss the role of artists in revolutionary struggles. The playwright believes that art can only find meaning in the cause of furthering social justice instead of existing as art for its own sake. Before Leje comes to recruit her for the farmers' movement, Funlola uses her art for meaningless fantasies. It is Leje who teaches Funlola the importance of collective participation in a revolutionary struggle. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in Leje's recruitment of Funlola but the latter is portrayed in a way which suggests that Osofisan views women as lacking in initiative. Notice, for example, Funlola's simplistic dependence on Leje's guidance in the following excerpt of their dialogue:

Funlola: So why do you want me?

Leje: The movement needs all capable people. The whole world, you see, is a farm, and all hands must toil both to cultivate it and eat of its fruit ...

Funlola: You know, I had always longed to know you. For a long time you were a dream I cradled in my sleep. And now, suddenly you are a reality ...

Leje: Well?

Funlola: I am afraid. See how I shiver!

Leje: (putting his arms round her) I shall protect you.

Funlola: But suppose ... suppose I am past belief?

Leje: Nonsense. No one ever walks that far. Not even in despair. No one voluntarily walks beyond firm ground. That is, without drowning ...

Funlola: But if they had something to cling to?

Leje: Like your art? A means merely to keep afloat?

Funlola: Compassion keeps the artist afloat.

Leje: Alright then, what I offer you is a chance to get your feet back on firm ground.

Funlola: You know, you're so persuasive. But what if I wither? If the creature spirit dies in me?

Leje: Impossible. You would already have put out roots. (Smiles) Look, your concern is one I am familiar with. In my drive for recruitment, I call on, say, a carpenter, and he asks me: what if I lose my skill? Or, a blacksmith, who asks: what if the fight takes me on the road of exile? Of alienation? What will happen to the old forge, to the tools abandoned?

Funlola: Yes? What will happen?

Leje: Renewal, I always answer. No one who commits himself will ever be asked to break with his ancestral roots ...

Funlola: I surrender. You're a real tortoise.<sup>73</sup>

The way in which Funlola surrenders to Leje's persuasion here gives the impression of a woman yielding to a lover. It is similar to the impression we get when Yajin offers her hand to Sontri in lieu of Moka. The playwright uses Yajin's submission to Sontri as an embodiment of her commitment to the ideals of the struggle. In this light, her rejection of Moka symbolizes her rejection of those elements which are used to perpetrate the oppression of the masses.

If Osofisan's inclusion of female characters in The Chattering and

the Song is aimed at spelling out his belief in the masses' collective participation, the use of traditional courtship to symbolize commitment to the revolutionary struggle prevents us from seeing his women characters as autonomous individuals. The use of the image of traditional courtship undermines the weight of women's contribution to a great extent and also creates the impression that the playwright views women as subordinate to the men in their contribution to these movements.

Basing his plays on the Kenyan situation, Ngugi wa Thiong'o examines women's participation in revolutionary struggles in the colonial and the post-colonial periods. Ngugi's focus on women's participation in these movements springs from his sympathies for working class women. This writer views women as 'the most exploited and oppressed section of the working class'.<sup>74</sup> From his socialist inclination Ngugi believes strongly in the co-operation between men and women in revolutionary struggles. However, his portrayal of women in This Time Tomorrow<sup>75</sup> and Mother Sing for Me<sup>76</sup> reflects his limitations as a male author writing on women. Significant differences can be discerned between the portrayal of women in these two plays and in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi which is co-authored by a woman playwright.<sup>77</sup>

Although he is sympathetic towards working class women in This Time Tomorrow Ngugi portrays them as lacking in political consciousness. This Time Tomorrow examines the falseness of independence in view of the poverty and degradation which characterize the life of the urban



masses. We are given the example of two women, a mother and her daughter whose subsistence depends on a very unlucrative petty trade of selling soup.

It is ironical that the root cause of Njango's problems in the city is the death of her husband in the struggle for independence. Since as a woman in a Gikuyu patriarchal traditional set up Njango does not own property, the death of her husband means an economic death for her. As an initial step towards building herself an economic base, Njango sends her son to the countryside to be educated by her brother while she keeps the daughter, Wanjiro, in the city to help her with her petty trade. Notice the irony of women being forced by circumstances to discriminate against and even to exploit their daughters. There is a similarity between Wanjiro's situation here and that of Cheja in Penina Muhando's Hatia<sup>78</sup> (Guilty). Cheja has to go to the city to work as a housemaid to earn money for the family while her brother relaxes in the countryside waiting for her to grow up and be married so that he can marry himself a wife with the money gained from Cheja's dowry!

While showing his sympathies for Njango and Wanjiro, Ngugi does not depict them as characters who are capable of contributing to a revolutionary struggle. Njango has too fatalistic an attitude while Wanjiro shows political immaturity whereby she is too naive about the essence of a better socio-economic situation.

Njango shows complete <sup>lack</sup> of interest when working class men around her are discussing politics. She has no political awareness. She is resigned to fate and believes that nothing can be done to improve on

the socio-economic situation of the workers. This can be noticed from her dialogue with Wanjiro in the following excerpt:

Wanjiro: (Relenting a little) I know how much you have suffered in this city. You have fought with drunks, wrestled with wolves and hyenas in this Uhuru market ... Two days ago I saw a dress in the city. I wanted to steal it.

Njango: You want to dress like white people?

Wanjiro: Black people wear clothes like those I saw.

Njango: This city is not for us.

Wanjiro: The stranger says the city belongs to us.

Njango: Alas only to a chosen few.

Wanjiro: The poor peasants and workers, who fought for uhuru shall inherit this earth, he says.<sup>79</sup>

Njango's experiences in the city are similar to those of Woman in Ngugi and Mugo's The Trial of Dedan Kimathi yet the two women respond very differently to their experiences. Where Woman's experience of oppression leads her to become militant and join the workers' revolutionary struggle, Njango resigns to fate and does not envisage the possibility of improving on her situation. Notice, for example, the sharp contrast between the teaching Njango gives Wanjiro and that given to Boy and Girl by Woman. Where Njango teaches her daughter to accept her position as a member of the down-trodden class, Woman cautions Boy against considering the position of the exploited as an inevitable situation and initiates him into the struggle which will lead him to better horizons.

Similarly, there is a contrast between the portrayal of Wanjiro

and that of Girl. Wanjiro's political awareness is very superficial when compared to that of Girl. Where, like Woman, Girl believes in a revolutionary change and struggles to make it a reality, Wanjiro does not believe that an improvement on the workers' plight could depend on her efforts.

The weakest point in Ngugi's portrayal of Wanjiro is his presentation of her as a sex object. Her relationship with Asinjo is strictly on sexual lines and not that of comrades-at-arms as in the case of Boy and Girl in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. In spite of Asinjo's claims that he wants to liberate Wanjiro from her exploitation by her mother, Wanjiro's eventual desertion of Njongo is merely a change of masters. As she says before she leaves, she goes with Asinjo to cook for him and wash his clothes.

Mother Sing for Me examines a workers' revolutionary struggle against imperialist forces in the colonial and, on a subtle level, post-colonial Kenya. In this musical play, women have two major roles. They are the symbol of the country, and in this role they represent the exploited majority. Secondly, they are the embodiment of the workers' resistance against oppression. Like Woman and Girl in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi Woman and Nyathira are not important as individual characters but in so far as they represent certain ideas of the playwright about a workers' revolutionary struggle. The playwright's conviction about the importance of women in such a movement is illustrated by the crucial position given to the two characters in this play.

The rape of Nyathira by agents of imperialism is symbolic of the



country's exploitation by imperial powers, foreign and local; notice that the rape is carried out by the foreign exploiter in conjunction with his local middleman. Mother Sing for Me was produced with the objective of inspiring the masses of Kenya to act and struggle against exploitation. Hence the use of a terrible and provocative symbol such as rape. Notice the amplification of the significance of the symbol through the singing of the raped woman:

Nyathira is clearly provocative and contemptuous ...

Nyathira: ... When Kanoru raped me ...  
 Which one of you raised his voice and said:  
 Leave her alone: She is our daughter!  
 Leave her alone: She is our sister!  
 Leave her alone: She is our mother!  
 Leave her alone: She is our bride!  
 Which one of you had the courage to raise a stick  
 and say:  
 If you so much as touch this daughter of the people  
 You will taste my wrath you fat imperialist.<sup>80</sup>

The symbol of rape is balanced with that of Woman's miscarriage caused by oppressive imperialist labour laws. Here, Woman is made to represent the country, while her unborn baby symbolizes the loss of the masses' hopes for independence caused by the collaboration of local leaders with foreign imperialists. On another level, the rape of Nyathira and the miscarriage of Woman symbolizes the extra burdens of oppression working class women have to carry by virtue of their sex.

The representation of women's participation in revolutionary struggles in Mother Sing for Me indicates Ngugi's indebtedness to The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. Woman is created on similar lines to Woman while Nyathira follows the ideas behind the creation of Girl in the two plays, respectively. However, significant differences are

apparent in the portrayal of these female characters in the two plays.

Woman in Mother Sing for Me plays the role of revolutionary mother as does Woman in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. As a revolutionary mother, Woman in Mother Sing for Me initiates Kariuki into the struggle. She does this by giving him 'the second birth'. The full implication of this role of Woman cannot be understood fully without an awareness of its significance in its original cultural context. The second birth was performed as a way of preparing Gikuyu youths for initiation. In this ritual, the mother symbolically gave away the son to the society whom he would henceforth serve after the ensuing circumcision ceremony. Ngugi's reference to this ritual in Mother Sing for Me shows his acknowledgement of women as mothers of the revolutionary struggle; women are not only mothers of the freedom fighters, they also nurture the revolution by providing psychological support.

The striking difference between the portrayal of Woman in Mother Sing for Me and that of Woman in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is that while the character in the latter play is seen contributing in the actual fighting, the woman in the former play contributes only on a symbolic level. In the portrayal of Woman in Mother Sing for Me Ngugi operates too much on a metaphysical level. Perhaps the playwright did not feel confident enough to operate on both metaphysical and physical levels in the portrayal of such a complex female character since this time he was writing on his own unlike in the case of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi where he had a woman as a co-author.

Through the portrayal of Nyathira women are presented as

psychological supporters of the men as well as actual fighters. Notice the way in which Nyathira uses her femininity to distract the enemy. It is also significant that Nyathira is the one who kills Kanoru, one of the people who raped her and the symbol of oppression. In this light her killing of Kanoru is metaphorically an optimistic note that the workers' struggle will succeed.

There is a significant difference between the portrayal of Nyathira and that of Girl in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. Where Girl is portrayed as more courageous than Boy and as responsive to Woman's efforts of making her into a future revolutionary mother, Nyathira is at times only an inferior supporter of Kariuki (Boy's counterpart). It is disappointing the way in which Nyathira even doubts black people's capabilities and potential to liberate themselves. Notice, for example, her scepticism and dependence on Kariuki in the following excerpt:

Nyathira: But can you make a gun?  
Can black people make guns?

Kariuki: The language of the eyes is easy to follow.

Nyathira: But can you, you, make a gun?

Kariuki: Yes, if you help me.

Nyathira: Tell me how I can help you and I will help you.<sup>81</sup>

Ngugi's position on women's participation in revolutionary struggles is similar to that of Osofisan in Morontodoun and The Chattering and the Song. While the two playwrights believe that women's participation in revolutionary struggles is crucial, they nevertheless believe in male superiority over women and this in turn



affects their portrayal of female characters in their political drama.

Our observation in this chapter is that although a good number of male playwrights are sensitive to the position of African women, many of them have limitations as male writers portraying female characters. Most of these male playwrights write from men's standpoints and therefore find it difficult to empathize with their heroines. In addition male playwrights who are chauvinistic towards women can afford to detach themselves from women's issues and examine them from an observer's standpoint. This is a factor which greatly affects male playwrights' portrayal of women and is the most significant point of contrast between the portrayal of women by the male playwrights examined here and that by their female counterparts in the next chapter.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

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## CHAPTER 5

### THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN BY MAJOR FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS

This chapter examines the works of five women playwrights. These are Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, Micere Mugo from Kenya, Penina Muhando (Mlama) from Tanzania, 'Zulu Sofola from Nigeria and Efua Sutherland from Ghana.

In Chapters 1, 2 and 3 a few plays by minor female playwrights were examined and it was observed here that not all female writers are consciously supportive towards their fellow women. Most of the female writers examined in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 have written one or two plays and are not developed either as creative writers or as political thinkers. In this chapter, we are working from the premise that the major female writers are more developed and have definite ideological stands. Our concern here, therefore, is to find out the extent to which these major female writers are supportive towards women and how much they consciously attempt to project a positive image of women by their portrayal of female characters.

The chapter is divided into three sections. These are 'Women and Tradition': 'Zulu Sofola and Ama Ata Aidoo; 'Women, Social Change and Women's Liberation': Penina Muhando; 'Women in Politics and Cultural Development': Efua Sutherland and Micere Mugo.

Women and Tradition: 'Zulu Sofola and Ama Ata Aidoo

Ama Ata Aidoo (F) Ghana:      Anowa 1970  
    Dilemma of a Ghost 1966

'Zulu Sofola (F) Nigeria:      King Emene 1974  
    Wedlock of the Gods 1972

Both Sofola and Aidoo believe strongly in the African traditional cultures as the basis of contemporary African drama. Interviewed about the importance of traditional African cultures in modern creative writing from Africa, Sofola had the following to say:

I don't see how else anybody would want to treat an African life without being aware of the tradition. Whether we agree with it, if we must deal with the people and their problems we must see the roots of the whole thing.<sup>1</sup>

Referring specifically to form, Aidoo makes a similar observation about the relevance of African cultures to modern African drama. She says:

I believe ... that in order for African drama to be valid, it has to derive lots of its impetus, its strength, from traditional African dramatic forms, however one conceives these forms, because they exist. What we must do is to find out what they are, and how we can use them.<sup>2</sup>

Aidoo, however, has not limited herself to form in the way in which she taps African traditions for her drama. The social criticism she makes in her plays is indebted to the traditional cultural heritage.

In Chapter 1 it was discussed how various African traditional practices undermined women's position in society. Most of the drama in Chapter 1 is by male playwrights and although many of these writers are sensitive to the plight of women, their representation of women's problems is from a male standpoint. This section discusses the

representation and portrayal of women in the traditional milieu by female playwrights, with reference to the works of Aidoo and Sofola.

There are similarities as well as disparities in the portrayal of women by Sofola and Aidoo. One of the points on which the two writers base their depiction of women characters is the question of freedom of women in deciding on their roles in life. This is an issue which is of great concern to many African women creative writers. Women writers are critical of the way in which conservatism in tradition makes it difficult for a woman to determine her destiny for herself away from social scrutiny and constraints.

The differences between the portrayal of women by Sofola and Aidoo, however, strike the audiences of their plays more than the similarities. Watching Aidoo's plays, one is never in any doubt that these are works of a playwright who wants to use drama as a tool to improve the plight of women. Sofola, on the other hand, seems ambivalent about gender politics. On portrayal of characters, for example, Aidoo's women are often supportive of one another; even when they do not operate on the same plane they find no difficulty empathizing with one another. Many of Sofola's women characters, on the contrary, are often so antagonistic towards each other that they leave the audience wondering what the playwright is getting at. An examination of two plays by each writer illustrates these similarities and disparities.

'Zulu Sofola's Wedlock of the Gods<sup>3</sup> deals with the problem of a woman's freedom in choosing her spouse in a traditional African



community. Ogwoma is forced by her parents to marry a man she hates. The events in the play take place when this man has died and Ogwoma is now expected to mourn him for a certain period and then be inherited as a wife by her brother-in-law. Ogwoma rebels against the tradition of mourning, breaks the taboo against having sex relations during this period and gets pregnant by the man she loved and wanted to marry instead of her late husband.

Among all Sofola's heroines Ogwoma is the only one who is sensitively portrayed and about whose plight the playwright seems to have a clear stand. Sofola's intention is to show that two traditions connected with marriage are anti-women. These are the tradition of arranged marriages and that of leviration whereby a widow is automatically inherited by an in-law. The playwright sees both traditions as relegating women to the position of commodities, that is, disregarding their worth as human beings.

Ogwoma is not allowed to choose her spouse. She would have liked to marry Uloko whom she loves, but instead she is forced to marry Adigwu. Ogwoma's father decides to marry her off to the latter because he can raise more money than Uloko. His excuse is that he needs the money for the divination expenses of one of his sons but, as one of his relatives explains, there are other alternatives open to him; it is not absolutely necessary for him to force Ogwoma into this marriage:

It is true that a man's daughter is his source of wealth, but never have our people supported such an action when there is another way to solve the problem.<sup>4</sup>

Notice the way in which women are regarded as commodities even by

their own parents. It would appear from this observation that, in fact, her brother's sickness is merely an excuse for Ogwoma's father to 'sell' off his daughter to the highest bidder. Hence the playwright is critical of the way in which men misuse tradition in order to enrich themselves through their daughters' marriages without considering the latter's happiness or welfare as human beings.

After marriage Ogwoma becomes her husband's property. This is reflected in her community's attitude towards her after her husband's death. During her mourning period, her mother-in-law guards her as some piece of property. In fact, her lover, Uloko, has to act as a thief when he comes to visit her. She is now to be automatically inherited by her brother-in-law. This is not with the idea of having her needs catered for as proponents of African traditional marriages have suggested<sup>5</sup>, but in order for her to pay her debt as a wife. It is obligatory for Ogwoma to produce children for her late husband. Her female friend explains the situation to her thus:

Adigwu had no children by you. His people want a child for him by a woman who was his wife. You are that wife and his brother can have that child for him by you.<sup>6</sup>

This is a community where, as in many traditional African communities, women are regarded as reproductive machines.

With this kind of position in mind therefore, the audience can understand Ogwoma's attitude after the death of her husband. It is not a sign of heartlessness or promiscuity that Ogwoma breaks the taboo against sex relations during mourning; it should be understood as a psychological reaction of a woman who sees the threat of being

crushed by yet another unfair traditional practice immediately she is released from the effects of one. Her reaction is also a mark of great strength considering that she challenges a tradition that has always been respected and also considering her inferior status as a woman.

As a woman, Ogwoma is expected to be submissive and accept the community's prerogative to weave her destiny for her. As her female friend reminds her, 'a woman's honour lies in her name and her sense of shame'.<sup>7</sup> The reactions of the community after Ogwoma's rebellion show the force against which she is up. Apart from the malicious gossip, the whole community is at the verge of madness in disbelief that a woman could dare break the taboo against sex relations during mourning. Notice her mother's analysis of Ogwoma's act:

Do you know that the punishment for this deed is a swelling of the body with water leaking from everywhere? Do you know that nobody will agree to treat you for fear they might also catch your curse? Do you know that even after death no forest will accept your body? ...<sup>8</sup>

Ogwoma stubbornly refuses to see her act as an indication of moral laxity on her part like her mother and the rest of the community. To her it is an independent decision to prove her love for Uloko. More than this, it is a reflection of the extent of her yearning for freedom to weave her own destiny for herself. This yearning for freedom is something Ogwoma shares with other independent-minded heroines of female African creative writers whose works are based on traditional settings. It is the same feeling of being choked by anti-women traditions and yearning for freedom which makes Anowa in Aidoo's Anowa<sup>9</sup>



have a similar confrontation with her mother when the latter raises objections against the man she has chosen for a husband.

Ogwoma's unhappiness and untimely death arouse the audience's sympathies and also make them question the traditions which form the root of her problems. It is unfortunate that Sofola's other heroines are not presented as positively as Ogwoma. The older heroines of Wedlock of the Gods and King Emene<sup>10</sup> are presented as conservative agents of anti-women traditions and as equally responsible as the men in causing the unhappiness of their fellow-women. These female characters also relate to each other and to the younger women with great animosity and it is not clear whether this representation is deliberate or due to the ideological weakness of the author.

The hostility Ogwoma suffers from Odibei, her mother-in-law, and Ogoli, the mother of her lover, seems to arise from some malicious jealousy of the older women towards the younger woman rather than from the effect of the latter's act of breaking the abominable taboo. Particularly in the case of the mother-in-law, Ogwoma's act seems a most welcome excuse to help trigger off some hatred she has always harboured for her daughter-in-law. The language the two old women use to attack Ogwoma is filthy and can only add to the audience's shock that women can be so beastly towards one another. Notice this from the animal imagery Odibei uses for Ogwoma in the following speech:

One does not have to see a skunk to smell him. I suspected this dog when her people were hawking her for any available man. I protested enough but my husband saw her as Adigwu's wife. So we took her in and took upon us a curse.<sup>11</sup>

Ogoli sees Ogwoma as having enticed her son to break the taboo, although the latter takes responsibility for his action and stands by his deep love for Ogwoma. Like Odibei, Ogoli uses filthy animal imagery to attack Ogwoma and this way leaves a very negative image of herself on the audience:

Ogoli:     (bursting into the house unexpectedly) Where is that shameless goat that wants to take all I have from me? ... This shameless dog has enticed my son into an abominable act, and I cannot walk on the road.<sup>12</sup>

The hostility of the two old women towards Ogwoma seems to arise from that age-old cliché of the rivalry between mothers and their sons' lovers more than from the taboo Ogwoma has broken. Ogoli's complaint that Ogwoma is taking all that she has in reference to her son is a clear indication of this. It may be observed here that all the old heroines in Sofola's Wedlock of the Gods and King Emene are widowed and have been widowed at an early age. We are then presented with a situation whereby these heroines have suffered bringing up their sons single-handed and a possessive relationship has developed which makes them antagonistic towards the sons' lovers or spouses. This is the explanation we are given for Ogoli's hostility towards Ogwoma when she breaks down with emotion towards the end of the play. She tells Uloko:

I am your mother. I married your father with the hopes of every young wife to live with my husband to old age. But death snatched him away from me when you were only a baby. I stayed by myself and worked my fingers off because I wanted you to be somebody in this life. I had always prayed that God would make your life long so that you could marry and give me the sons and daughters that death denied me and your father. I had hoped that you would grow up and be a strong and brave

man like your father. I had always prayed to God for the day when in my old age I would look back and feel that all my struggles had not been in vain.<sup>13</sup>

What immediately strikes the audience from this speech is inconsistency on the part of the playwright. We are dealing with a play whose plot depends very much on the tragic effects of the tradition of leviration. What reason would have led Ogoli to live alone after the early death of her husband in a community which strongly believes in having a widow continue the lineage of her husband by being automatically inherited by an appropriate in-law?

Odibei's revengeful hatred of Ogwoma is the most incomprehensible attitude of a woman towards a woman who is young enough to be her daughter. In many plays examined in this study, even in cases where two women share a husband and one of the women is old enough to be the younger woman's mother, there is always a mother-daughter relationship between them rather than a rivalry or the hatred of the kind we have here.<sup>14</sup> Before Ogwoma breaks the taboo, we are not given any indication to show that she has behaved in a way which is capable of provoking so much hatred from her mother-in-law. And when the latter murders Ogwoma towards the end of the play, Sofola does not present this event in a way which would persuade the audience that it is a result of extreme provocation. Instead, it appears as if Odibei is taking advantage of the event of the breaking of the taboo to quench some thirst for blood which she has had for some time before now.

Nneobi in Sofola's second play, King Emene, is a replica of Odibei. Nneobi is an evil woman. The tragedy in the play is based on Nneobi's



murder of her co-wife's son to pave the way for her own son to succeed her husband as king. It is true that Nneobi is fighting tradition by this murder, the tradition of having the first son automatically inherit the kingdom at the death of the father, but there is nothing in the play to persuade the audience that this murder is necessary or understandable. Towards the end of the play, Sofola tries to solicit sympathies for her heroine by giving us the background to her wicked act but by then too much damage has been done and we cannot help joining the other characters in the play who throw words of condemnation at her.

Nneobi murders her co-wife's son out of selfish ambition rather than as a way of fighting an unfair tradition. This is implied by the explanation she gives for the murder. She tells her son, the king:

The rat did not fall from the ceiling without a cause ... I suffered in my childhood with a poor mother of twelve children. I saw my mother cry bitterly night and day when she had no food for her hungry children. I could not bear this, so I started praying very early for a better life. My prayers were answered. Your father married me. My fortune and that of my children changed. I promised myself never to return to those miserable days.

It happened that you were born the second son. This worried me very much. I decided that it was better to be king than brother of the king. So I did the deed.<sup>15</sup>

Ambition per se is not negative, but the type of ambition which is satisfied at the expense of human life cannot be condoned. Nneobi's ambition comes before the life and general welfare of those around her. And this is personal ambition, not ambition for the future of her children as implied in the last part of the above speech. Nneobi puts

her own personal prestige above the life and general welfare of those around her. Her attitude towards the Peace Week celebrations reveals her selfishness and irresponsibility to those around her. The play is built on the tradition of Peace Week, an annual ceremony to cleanse a community of the ills of the passing year and to usher in the new year. As the oracle responds in the play, it is very important for the community to observe physical as well as behavioural cleanliness for this ritual to succeed. At her age and with her experience as a queen and now as Queen Mother, Nneobi should be well aware of the drastic consequences of failure to meet the requirements of the oracle before ushering in the new year. Yet when the goddess Mkpitime sends the message that the crime in the royal family be revealed before the ritual can be carried out, Nneobi is still very excited that the ceremony should go on.

The importance of the Peace Week for Nneobi is only in the way it gives her a chance to see her son in pomp and majesty; its practical and solemn function of helping her community cope with life in the coming year is of no significance to her. Notice this attitude from her excitement when she hears the horn blower praise the king, her son:

Oh God, I hear the horn player. My God, I hear it! This is a great day for my son. His subjects must see him at the height of his pomp and greatness. Oh God, how I waited for this day! (To the altar) Oh goddess of mercy, make this day the beginning of a reign that shall know no end. My God, the horn speaks loudly and clearly. It is Ogugua the instrument praises. It is my Ogugua, the King of Oligbo. It is he the wind greets. It is he the storm and the trees herald. It is my son, the King, that comes!<sup>16</sup>

Nneobi is intoxicated with the prestige of occupying the position

of Queen Mother. This coupled with her need to cover up the murder of her co-wife's son makes her assume the responsibilities of the queen thereby causing rivalry and antagonism between her and her daughter-in-law. This rivalry interferes with the smooth running of the kingdom and contributes to the anger of the goddess against the community since matters are now not handled in the prescribed manner.

In her two plays discussed here, Sofola seems not to be interested in correcting the image of women in Africa. Her fascination with the hostilities and malicious jealousies between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, for example, reflect the attitude of a playwright who is only interested in the negative side of relationships between women. Although not all relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law could be said to have been perfect in African communities, the rivalry which exists in these relationships in societies built on nuclear family systems were curbed to a very great extent in the traditional African setting. The extended family system and communal cohesion prevented the type of attachment between sons and mothers which would lead the latter into viewing their sons' wives as rivals. More often than not, a relationship of mother and daughter was built between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, respectively. Notice, for example, the sharp contrast between the relationships of Sofola's mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and that of Esi Kom and Eulalie in Ama Ata Aidoo's Dilemma of a Ghost<sup>17</sup>. Although her daughter-in-law comes from a different culture from her own and is initially difficult to understand,



Esi Kom has a very motherly attitude towards her. Indeed, towards the end of Dilemma of a Ghost, Esi Kom takes an admirable stride in helping Eulalie find a home in this culture which is as strange to her as her American one is to Esi Kom at the beginning of their relationship.

A second aspect of Sofola's portrayal of women which is very disturbing is her representation of women in positions of responsibility. Her portrayal of Nneobi in King Emene, for example, is very negative. As discussed above, Nneobi places prestige and personal ambition above communal welfare. If this is Sofola's general statement about women in positions of social responsibility, it is not shared by other female playwrights. Notice, for instance, the contrast between the portrayal of Nneobi and that of Woman in Mugo and Ngugi's The Trial of Dedan Kimathi<sup>18</sup> and that of Queen Mother in Efua Sutherland's Foriwa.<sup>19</sup> The two women put the welfare of their societies before their own. It is interesting to note the way in which Queen Mother upsets the expectations of her community by refusing to observe the usual ceremonial pomp at the festival because she wants to emphasize real and concrete development instead of empty exhibitionism. This is quite the opposite of Nneobi's approach to the position of leadership in Sofola's play.

The portrayal of women by Ama Ata Aidoo differs significantly from that of 'Zulu Sofola although both women writers base their works on the traditional African setting. The major critical views expressed in Aidoo's plays indicate this playwright's sensitivity to the plight

of women in the traditional context.

In Dilemma of a Ghost Aidoo presents women in a way which shows her strong belief that their survival in an antagonistic traditional world depends very much on their support for one another. This is a world in which women have no freedom to determine their life styles for themselves. In this play, Aidoo shows women's freedom in a traditional setting curtailed by the way the community censors not only their behaviour but their entire role on the social as well as family level.

The discussion of the plight of women in Dilemma of a Ghost centres around a female character to whom expectations of a traditional African community from women is alien. But it should be noted that the choice of this character, Eulalie Yawson, is deliberate on the playwright's part. The use of a black American female character who has spent her childhood and early adulthood in a Western-oriented culture enables Aidoo to distance herself from the traditional African culture and hence examine the plight of women in this culture objectively. In addition to the use of a character to whom the African traditional culture is alien, Aidoo draws parallels between Eulalie's experiences and those of the women who have lived in this culture all along.

Having been brought up in a Western-type of culture, Eulalie is independent and organizes her life with tremendous freedom without considering the attitudes of her husband's community. She smokes and drinks in a world where such habits are taboo for women and where it is

the whole community's business to scrutinize how a woman conducts herself. Aidoo's intention in Dilemma of a Ghost is not to condone or condemn her female characters' behaviour but to discuss the plight of women in a world where they have no freedom to organize their lives for themselves.

The major issue on which Aidoo's ideas on the position of women revolves in Dilemma of a Ghost is that of women's role in procreation. It was discussed in Chapter 1 that in traditional Africa a woman proves her worth through bearing and rearing children and that when a woman does not fulfill this expectation her whole community ostracizes her. Most of the plays in which this issue has been discussed in Chapter 1 are by male playwrights and a significant difference can be detected between these writers' approach and that of Aidoo. Where the male playwrights present women as helpless vis-à-vis communal pressure, Aidoo portrays her female characters as capable of protesting. Thus Eulalie greets the traditional therapy for her assumed barrenness with indignation and she will not have children until she is ready for them. Even Esi Kom, Eulalie's mother-in-law who has been immersed in tradition, can admire Eulalie's sense of freedom and strength to contravene communal expectations. Esi Kom's somewhat envious admiration of Eulalie's independence is an indication of the fact that she too has the potential to protest against the restrictive nature of her position, only that she has lived too long in the African traditional milieu and she belongs to a generation to which the possibility of going against communal expectations is unheard of. It is significant



that Esi Kom can now side with Eulalie against her own son and see that the latter is partly to blame for their earlier conflicts because of his failure to bridge the cultural gap between them.

The fact that Esi Kom can now understand Eulalie while the two belong not only to different cultures but also to different generations is remarkable as one of the elements in Dilemma of a Ghost which distinguish Aidoo as a playwright who uses drama as a tool for correcting the image of women in society. It is true that initially Esi Kom and Eulalie cannot understand each other, but their conflicts are not based on stereotyped jealousy between a woman and her daughter-in-law as in Sofola's plays. Aidoo makes it quite clear that the problems between Eulalie and Esi Kom have their roots in cross-cultural differences. Once these differences are resolved, the older woman assumes a maternal status and offers the younger the home she was deprived of by the early death of her mother.

Aidoo's emphasis on women's support for one another in Dilemma of a Ghost is reflected by the way in which her characters empathize with one another even if they have no close social relationship. First Woman who has never actually met Eulalie on a personal level can empathize with and support her because she is childless like Eulalie. Having been brought up in a traditional African culture where procreation is taken as a most crucial duty for women, First Woman can only visualize Eulalie's childlessness as resulting from barrenness. For this reason she sympathizes with Eulalie deeply, envisaging the hardship she must undergo in a culture which does not give women the

freedom to choose whether to have children or not. She says:

If it is real barrenness,  
Then, oh stranger-girl,  
Whom I do not know,  
I weep for you.  
For I know what it is  
To start a marriage with barrenness ...  
For my world  
Which you have run to enter  
Is most unkind to the barren.<sup>20</sup>

Aidoo's treatment of the relationship between women who have children and those who are childless differs significantly from that by male writers. In plays by male writers, women who have children regard childless ones with suspicion and hostility. In Aloys Odhiambo's Odanga's Flower<sup>21</sup>, for example, the women who have children are antagonistic towards the childless king's wife and they take her interest in their children as motivated by ill feelings. Similarly, in Henshaw's Children of the Goddess<sup>22</sup>, one of Asari Amansa's co-wives accuses her of engaging in witchcraft and sees her as responsible for the loss of her cousin's child.

In Aidoo's Dilemma of a Ghost, on the other hand, the playwright is out to demonstrate that relationships between women need not always be characterized by antagonism, but can be the sharing of experiences. There is sincere friendship between First Woman and Second Woman in Dilemma of a Ghost in spite of their differing situations. The one is childless while the other has too many children. Instead of the women being jealous of or antagonistic towards each other, they share their experiences and find consolation in listening to each other's problems.

These women share not only anxieties based on their personal experiences but also their views on the plight of women in general.

Aidoo addresses herself to the position of women in Africa more overtly in her later play, Anowa.<sup>23</sup> As in Dilemma of a Ghost, in Anowa the plight of women in traditional Africa is examined around the question of freedom of women in organizing their own lives independently from their communities. The playwright looks at the situation through the attitudes of three generations of women represented by Old Woman, Badua and Anowa.

Old Woman represents a generation of conservative women whose lives are so entrenched in the traditional position of women that they would not welcome changes. These are the women who outdo the men in curtailing the freedom of the younger generation of women. For example where Old Man uses reason to comment on the life style of the younger generation of women, Old Woman uses prejudices against women and indiscriminately hates those women who exercise freedom and independence of thought.

Old Woman hates Badua and Anowa because, in varying degrees, these two women are more independent than herself. Her criticism of these women has a tone of spite and jealousy in it which makes the audience suspect that she is merely against other generations of women acquiring the strength that was denied her generation. 'It is significant that instead of Old Man it is Old Woman who condemns Anowa as a witch because she cannot stand her strength. She expresses the conservative attitude in traditional Africa that strong, independent women are unnatural when



she says:

She is a witch,  
 She is a devil,  
 She is everything that is evil ...  
 I wonder what a woman eats to produce a child like Anowa.  
 I am sure that such children are not begotten by normal  
 natural processes ... Ah they issue from cancerous growths,  
 tumours that grow from evil dreams.<sup>24</sup>

With this kind of negative attitude towards strong independent women, it is not surprising that while Old Man sees conservative traditionalism and the entire society as responsible for the tragedy of Anowa and Kofi Ako, Old Woman assigns all the blame to Anowa. Old Woman would not blame the society or the conservative nature of this society because she is the very embodiment of conservatism and the voice of her community. Thus while Old Man sees Anowa's situation as the tragedy of clairvoyants and those whose insights are too advanced for their societies, Old Woman condemns Anowa for daring to have moral insight, forgetting that she is a mere woman. Notice the difference from their observations:

Old Man: They used to say around here that Anowa behaved as though she were a heroine in a story. Some of us wish she had been happier and that her life had not had so much of the familiar scent in it. She was true to herself. She refused to come back here to Yebi, to our gossiping and our judgements.<sup>25</sup>

Old Woman: She thinks our forefathers should have waited for her to be born so that she could have upbraided them for their misdeeds and shown them what actions of men are virtuous.<sup>26</sup>

It is not accidental that Old Woman is given the name 'The-Mouth-that-Eats-Salt-and-Pepper'. An important question to ask in connection

with the portrayal of Old Woman is what role such a negative female character plays in the work of a writer who is so supportive to the cause of women. Old Woman is like Nana of Aidoo's other play, Dilemma of a Ghost in her rigid support of the status quo which imprisons women. Having gone through all the stages of womanhood in traditional African culture, the two women have attained a very prestigious position in which they are no longer regarded as women. They are elders who are on an equal footing with the men of their age, and they are at a level which is above that of all younger women and men alike. Notice, for example, how Old Woman at times dominates Old Man and also how Nana commands both men and women of her clan. It is Nana's adamance which leads the clan into making those abortive plans to force Eulalie to undergo traditional therapy so that the latter can produce a great grandchild for the old woman. To Nana as well as to Old Woman, the question of a woman's freedom to determine her life style is absolutely inconceivable.

The point of Aidoo in presenting these two old women as such is to show that conservative elements which undermine the position of women do not dwell only among men. Many of the dangerous elements of this nature are to be found deeply couched among women who, when they are no longer victims of oppression, forget how it feels to be in an underprivileged position and become even more severe than the men in curtailing fellow-women's freedom.

In the generation immediately below Old Woman's is Badua who, unlike Old Woman, is not a stereotype of her group of women. Besides

lacking in the submissiveness required of women, Badua is sensitive, independent, and on one level, conscious of women's oppression in the traditional setting. She expresses this awareness when she says, 'a woman is not a stone, but a human being'.<sup>27</sup>

The problem with Badua is that in her sense of freedom, she operates only on a selfish plane of personal freedom to satisfy personal ends rather than on the dimension of freedom for women in general. That she objects to the idea of apprenticing her daughter as a priestess is not in any way in consideration of her daughter's welfare; it is because Anowa's initiation into priesthood would deny Badua of the chance to climb into the rank of a grandmother since as a priestess Anowa would not have children. It is the selfish nature of Badua's sense of freedom which explains the paradoxical situation that the relationship between mother and daughter, both of whom have a sense of independence and freedom, should be characterized by such an intense conflict.

In her attempts to have Anowa submit to her views as a mother, Badua ends up behaving in a manner which is contradictory to her consciousness of women's oppression in the traditional context. It is shocking, for example, to hear the same woman who articulates the strong statement that women are human beings arguing that 'a good woman does not have a mouth or a brain',<sup>28</sup> when she wants to subjugate her daughter to her rule.

From the foregoing, it would appear that Badua is no better than Old Woman in her approach to the position of women in the traditional



setting. Her attempts to make Anowa into a submissive woman suggest that she too is likely to be as ruthless towards independent women below her as Old Woman when she attains the latter's status. Neither Old Woman nor Badua has resisted the psychological tendency of the oppressed to oppress those below them as a way of releasing their frustrations. When this tendency is allowed to continue, a chain is built up and unless the chain is broken, hope for liberation becomes very grim. Anowa's tragedy is that she is the sacrificial victim who breaks this chain.

Anowa is the strongest female character in Aidoo's drama, but she is also the character who experiences most problems of rejection both on familial and societal levels. Anowa's problems are rooted in the fact that the traditional setting in which she lives is too conservative to accept strong independent women. It is her sense of independence and freedom which causes antagonism between her and her mother. Her act of delaying her marriage until she has decided when and who to marry against her parents' sanctions shows the extent of Anowa's independence. As discussed in Chapter 1, a woman's marriage is the concern of not only one's immediate family, but also of her entire community and a woman who delays her marriage is considered a rebel and a misfit.

Anowa is a very sensitive individual. Unlike Badua, her consciousness of social injustice towards women is not limited to her own personal needs, but it is an awareness which opens her mind to see other forms of oppression in society. Like Abraha Poukou in Zegoua Nokan's Abraha

Poukou ou une Grande Africaine<sup>29</sup>, Anowa sees the relationship between the oppression of women by men and that experienced by people who are enslaved. She asks her husband, 'What is the difference between any of your men and me? Except that they are men and I'm a woman?'<sup>30</sup>

As a character who is sensitive to other people's oppression, Anowa becomes an appropriate symbol of Africa in the play's political dimension where Aidoo discusses the suffering of black people from the days of slave trade to the contemporary period. Notice the intensity of this symbol from Anowa's account of her dream:

That night, I woke up screaming hot; my body burning and sweating from a horrible dream. I dreamt that I was a big, big woman. And from my insides were huge holes out of which poured men, women and children. And the sea was boiling hot and steaming. And as it boiled, it threw out many, many giant lobsters, boiled lobsters, each of whom as it fell turned into a man or a woman, but keeping its lobster head and claws. And they rushed to where I sat and seized the men and women as they poured out of me, and they tore them apart, and dashed them to the ground and stamped upon them. And from their huge courtyards, the women ground my men and women and children on mountains of stone. But there was never a cry or a murmur; only a bursting, as a ripe tomato or a swollen pod.<sup>31</sup>

A woman is the most appropriate character to serve as a symbol of the continent here because women are the bearers of children and as mothers they carry the brunt of the suffering when people are oppressed. Michael Etherton has rightly suggested that Anowa's abhorrence of slavery extends to include the playwright's comment on the contemporary political situation whereby on the personal level people enrich themselves by exploiting their fellow citizens and on an international level nations thrive on capitalistic exploitation of other nations.<sup>32</sup>

Anowa is further used by the author to comment on contemporary

moral sterility arising from too much emphasis on material wealth. On one level, Kofi's impotence is a deliberate reversal of roles whereby Aidoo gets her heroine to voice what traditional societies have never dared to put into words; that is, men could be responsible for the failure of a couple to produce children. As mentioned in Chapter 1, women have always had to carry the blame when a couple is unable to have children. Anowa challenges Kofi to prove that he is not the cause of their childlessness:

Kofi, are you dead? (Pause) Kofi, is your manhood gone?  
I mean, you are like a woman. (Pause) Kofi, there is not  
hope any more, is there? (Pause) Kofi ... tell me, is that  
why I must leave you? That you have exhausted your  
masculinity acquiring slaves?<sup>33</sup>

But on a symbolic level, Kofi's impotence is the moral sterility of the contemporary African man which arises out of his worship of material wealth. On the one hand the contemporary African man would like to exploit what strong women have to offer in order to boost his image while on the other hand he is unable to compromise with her strength. Kofi, for example, would like to use Anowa as a symbol of his material progress (notice his concern about her dressing) but he is unable to cope with her strength.

Anowa dies because her society is unwilling to change in order to accommodate strong women. As Old Man observes, society is to blame for her death because, 'It is men who make men mad. Who knows if Anowa would have been a better woman, a better person if we had not been what we are?'<sup>34</sup> Aidoo's portrayal of Anowa is an indictment on African societies about their negative treatment and rejection of women



who distinguish themselves either through intelligence, sense of independence or general strength of character. Michael Etherton captures the position of such women very clearly when he analyses Anowa's rejection thus:

All her society can do is understand her as a priestess or a witch. Indeed, how many women have been branded witch by a society unable to cope with their intelligence and rationalism? Anowa is able to comprehend the absolute evil of slavery in a way that her husband, contained within the social system, cannot. She is also able to comprehend the true significance of the relationship between a man and a woman, a husband and a wife.<sup>35</sup>

Women, Social Change and Women's Liberation: Penina Muhando

Penina Muhando (F) Tanzania: Hatia (Guilty) 1974  
Heshima Yangu (My honour) 1974  
Talaka si Mke Wangu (I divorce you)  
 1976  
Nguzo Mama (The mother pillar) 1982

The women characters of Penina Muhando (Mloma) have the cultural transition of Africa as their social background. Her drama examines the problems related to the assimilation of Western-oriented values by traditional African communities and also problems related to the development of her country into a modern state. Muhando sees drama as a didactic tool; she sees her role as a writer in terms of educating her society and helping them find solutions to problems emanating from their movement from traditionalism into modernity. The playwright outlines her ideological stand as follows:

I think when I do my writing I want to pick any problem which is troubling the people in Tanzania at the present time.

Because I see myself as having a duty to try to help the society either in showing where the problems are or trying to suggest solutions to problems or at least to make people aware that the sources of this and that problem are in this or that thing ... I strongly believe that in Tanzania we can't afford to have art for art's sake at this present time ... We have got so many problems as a developing country and there is no place for art for art's sake.<sup>36</sup>

It is to meet this objective that Muhando writes in Kiswahili instead of English. Kiswahili is the national language of Tanzania and, besides its use as the medium of teaching in educational institutions, it is understood by the majority unlike English which is understood only by the literate.

As a woman writer, Muhando is particularly sensitive to the plight of women in this transitional period. In most of her plays, she gives a significant space to the problems experienced by women in contemporary Tanzania and Africa in general. One important point to note about this playwright is that in her portrayal of female characters she does not idealize women. Far from it; she criticizes them, sometimes very severely, for the contributions they make which have adverse effects on their position in society. However, there is a fundamental difference between Muhando and male playwrights who are critical towards women. Unlike some male writers, her criticism of women is not mere cynicism. When she voices a problem, Muhando goes beyond the identification of the problem and puts it into its social or economic context. This is her sensitive way of explaining (though not condoning) the actions of her characters. Secondly, in situations where she makes severe attacks on women, she leaves the audience in no doubt that her intention is to

provoke women to wake up and act in an attempt to improve on their position in society.

Muhando has written extensively but in this study we are concerned only with those plays which have a direct relationship with women's issues. In Hatia<sup>37</sup> (Guilty) and Heshima Yangu<sup>38</sup> (My honour) the playwright examines the problems of women in the context of cultural changes. Talaka si Mke Wangu<sup>39</sup> (I divorce you) and Nguzo Mama<sup>40</sup> (The mother pillar) focus on the role of women in national development and in their own emancipation.

Hatia examines the plight of women during the advent of urbanization and money economy in Tanzania. The traditional role of women as commodities is translated into new terms. Daughters have to leave the rural areas to earn money for the family in the city where they are confronted by new social problems.

The playwright discusses the new social problems through the experiences of Cheja, a young girl who has had to leave the rural area to work as a housemaid in the city and falls prey to corrupt approaches of men associated with the urban areas. Cheja is presented as an innocent victim of the conflict between traditional attitudes towards women and the modern way of life.

To emphasize Cheja's innocence and vulnerability, the playwright presents the city as overwhelmingly dangerous and Juma, Cheja's lover, as unscrupulous. Right at the beginning of the play, the Fisherman warns Cheja that unless she takes great care in this city she will



lose her life. When Cheja informs Juma that she is pregnant the man issues her with threats. He tells her that the pregnancy is her problem alone and even if she tried to catch him she would not manage because the city is large.

Muhando sees Cheja's problem as having economic roots and also as related to the underprivileged position of women. Cheja has to go and work in the city because as a woman she is regarded as an economic asset. The two ideas are implied by Cheja's mother when she laments having to do too much work:

Kwanza hii yote shauri ya umaskini tu. Mwanangu asingekwenda kazi Dalisalama saa hizi mimi kazi yangu ingekuwa tu ni kufanyiwa kila kazi.<sup>41</sup>

(All this is due to poverty. Had my child not gone to work in Dar-es-Salaam, my work would have been to sit while she does all the work for me.)<sup>42</sup>

The attitude of Cheja's mother towards her daughter illustrates the way in which the exploitation of women and the society's treatment of them as beasts of burden forces them into a situation whereby they end up exploiting those women below them if only to have a break.

The position of women as economic assets in Hatia is best illustrated by the scene where the village elders discuss Cheja's pregnancy. It is significant to note that the elders do not see the need to consult either Cheja or her mother during their deliberations. Women have no opportunity to contribute to matters of public concern even if these matters directly affect them. This arises out of the chauvinistic attitude towards women as stupid; an attitude which is often used to make sure that women do not offer wise judgements that may contradict those

of the men. In connection with Cheja's pregnancy, the men are not interested in her welfare but in the personal gains they can reap out of this problem. The attitude of Cheja's father and brother in particular show to what extent they view the girl as an economic asset rather than a human being. The brother, for example, is in a hurry to calculate how much material should be paid by the man accused of being responsible for the pregnancy as he would like to spend some of the goods on his own marriage.

Her brother's attitude towards her explains why Cheja accepts her lover's suggestion that she accuses her employer falsely of having raped her and made her pregnant. If she is regarded as a mere economic asset in her home, she is likely to be cast out immediately she gets a baby and becomes an economic liability. The playwright is at pains to explain that Cheja's false accusation of her employer is not an indication of the young woman's moral vacuity but it is the maternal considerations of an economically deprived unmarried expectant mother. Pleading for forgiveness Cheja says:

Najua ni vigumu kwenu kunisamehe baada ya yote yalitokea.  
 Nilifanya kosa kubwa kumsingizia Mzee Sembuli. Lakini  
 nilidhani kwa kufanya vile mtoto wangu atapata matunzo kama  
 watoto wengine. Mimi mwenyewe ningepata matunzo kama wengine.  
 Lakini sikukumbuka kuwa matunzo hayo hayangekuwa ya halali.<sup>43</sup>

(I know it is difficult for you to forgive me after all that has happened. I erred greatly by accusing Mzee Sambuli falsely. But I had thought that by so doing my child would be looked after like other children. And me too, I would have been looked after like others. But I did not remember that this kind of welfare would not have been an honest one.)

To dismiss Cheja as a 'deviant' the way Jesse Mollel does is

to misunderstand the playwright's intention in her portrayal of this character.<sup>44</sup> Like Cheja's father who accuses her of immorality the minute he hears that she is pregnant, Mollel is using a male-chauvinistic yardstick which never considers women's deprived socio-economic position when judging their actions.

Cheja is a young woman caught in a world where the socio-economic survival of women is so dependent on men that an innocent woman can be driven to desperate ends to fend for herself and her children. This economic dependence is the very root of Cheja's pregnancy; Cheja sleeps with Juma believing that he is her future husband only for her trust to be greeted with rejection. It should be noted that Cheja's rejection and her subsequent predicament is a new phenomenon arising from urbanization and the whole question of having young girls live away from their homes. In the traditional setting the influence of corrupt men like Juma on young girls was curbed by the strict moral code and the severe punishment levelled against offenders of his type.

Cheja's decision to join an ujamaa<sup>45</sup> village shows Muhando's support of the ideals of the 'Arusha Declaration of 1967' which marks the beginning of Tanzania's socialist political structure. The policy on which ujamaa villages are established is very appropriate as a way of encouraging a sense of community among the citizens and preventing the exploitation of one human being by another. Although on the ideological level these villages operate on the basis of communal work and collective ownership of resources, on the practical level this does not necessarily erase the exploitation and subjugation of women by men.



Chauvinistic attitudes towards women still thrive and these need to be tackled as specific issues. Perhaps it is to meet this need that Muhando wrote her next play, Heshima Yangu (My honour)<sup>46</sup>.

In Heshima Yangu Muhando's intention is not to criticize the ideals of ujamaa but to show that ujamaa alone cannot liberate women; chauvinistic attitudes towards women need to be confronted if their situation is to improve.

In this play women's problems are examined through the relationship between Mzee Isa, an ujamaa village official, and Mama Salum, one of the women living in his area. Twenty-five years before the play begins, Mzee Isa made Mama Salum pregnant and rejected her with the threat that if she revealed that he was responsible for this pregnancy he would kill her. In consideration for her son's welfare, Mama Salum complies with Mzee Isa's demand. However, the embers of their relationship are raked by the intended marriage between Salum, the product of this relationship, and Rukia, Mzee Isa's daughter.

Muhando's criticism of male-chauvinistic officials is presented through her contrasting portrayal of Mzee Isa on the one hand and Mama Salum and Rukia on the other. Like Cheja in Hatia, Rukia is presented as an innocent victim of a male-dominated world symbolised by Mzee Isa. Rukia's innocence is pitted against the emptiness of what Mzee Isa terms his honour and dignity. His reaction when he discovers that Rukia loves Salum is to abuse his daughter claiming that she is lowering his honour and dignity by associating with a low-grade young man who has neither father nor uncle of any worth to boast of. Mzee Isa's talk of honour

and dignity proves to be mere hot air when he is discovered to be the one who was responsible for Salum's 'illegitimate'<sup>47</sup> birth.

Mama Salum is similarly portrayed as an innocent victim of Mzee Isa's selfishness and empty inflated ego. She has had to bear the shame and the task of bringing up a fatherless child for so long because of Mzee Isa's threat. But the playwright is careful to underline that it <sup>is</sup> neither cowardice nor a sense of self-preservation which leads Mama Salum to agree to Mzee Isa's demand. Like Cheja in her false accusation of her employer, it is consideration for the future of her child which accounts for Mama Salum's twenty-five years' silence. Deflating Mzee Isa of his empty honour in the presence of Rukia and Salum she now declares:

Wasema juu ya heshima saa hizi. Heshima unaijua wewe. Mimi siijui hata siku moja. Miaka yote hii nimeishi kwenye aibu ya kuwa na mtoto asiye na baba. Heshima yangu uliivunja wewe zamani sana ... Zamani ulinitishia kuniua basi nikanyamaza nikiogopa kuwa nikifa nani atanitunzia mwanangu, Salum ... Kama ni heshima unayoililia wewe mimi siifahamu. Kwa hiyo siogopi kusema. Kama kudanganya watu na kutesa wengine ndiyo heshima unayoidhamiri wewe basi mimi leo niko tayari kuivunjilia mbali ... Salum mwanangu ningekuwa sikupendi mimi usingeishi kufikia umri ulio nao lakini ni upendo huo huo utakao kuletea huzuni ya muda lakini ya haki kwa sababu itakuponya kutoka balaa na kukupa heshima ya haki. Huwezi kumwoa Rukia. Baba yako huyu hapa - Mzee Isa.<sup>48</sup>

(This time you are talking about dignity. Have you ever known what dignity means. I have never known dignity even for a day. All these years I have lived with the shame of having a fatherless child. You broke my dignity long ago ... You threatened to kill me so I remained silent fearing that if I died there would be no one to look after my child, Salum. If you are crying for dignity, I do not know it. I am not afraid to speak this time. If deceiving people and causing pain and suffering to others is ... dignity, then I am ready to destroy it ... Salum my son, if I did not love you, you would not have lived to your present age. The same love



will now bring you temporary sorrow, but it will save you from distress and give you true dignity. You cannot marry Rukia. This is your father, Mzee Isa.)

The above speech is important for two reasons. First, it underscores the difference between Mama Salum's approach to honour and that of Mzee Isa. Secondly, it shows Mama Salum's level of maturity as a woman living in a male-dominated and male-chauvinistic environment.

Whereas to Mzee Isa honour means superficial prestige even at the expense of his own child's life, to Mama Salum it means giving children a solid foundation for their future existence. In view of this difference, it is Mama Salum who represents the playwright's viewpoint about the importance of parents' duty to bring up their children properly. The theme of child-rearing is given more attention in Talaka si Mke Wangu<sup>49</sup> (I divorce you).

Mama Salum's awareness that her sense of dignity is in essence and in practice more meaningful than that of Mzee Isa and her courage to challenge him as a matter of principle without fearing that perhaps he may use his official power to victimize her marks the beginning of this woman's consciousness in gender politics. The importance of women's political consciousness to their oppression by men is one of the major issues Muhando discusses in Nguzo Mama<sup>50</sup> (The mother pillar) written almost a decade after Heshima Yangu.

In Talaka si Mke Wangu Muhando uses drama directly as an educative tool. This play is based on the playwright's belief that women have an important role to play in the upbringing of children because child-rearing is a fundamental basis of children's psychological health and



in turn the structure of a healthy nation. Muhando's message to women is that they ought to adapt to changing social circumstances without allowing themselves to be derailed from their family responsibilities of looking after children.

The protagonist in Talaka si Mke Wangu is Kona, a young man who has turned into a delinquent child and then into a criminal owing to poor upbringing. Kona's mother disagrees with his father and gets divorced. Kona is left at the mercy of a step-mother who does not see why she should waste her time looking after another woman's child. Muhando is very critical of the two women and uses them as examples of those who have allowed themselves to be distracted from performing an important task by their assimilation of new values.

Mama Kona, Kona's mother, is portrayed as a woman who, though not rich herself, has assimilated the warped values of the nouveaux-riches who put material things before the social welfare of others and who judge progress by such superficialities as fashionable clothes. Mama Kona disagrees with Baba Kona over material things and not over something that is of great importance. When she is divorced she leaves in a hurry as if to grab the opportunity and wear those fashionable clothes she has missed. Her parting message to her husband shows that all along she has been viewing marriage as a ladder for material things and to her the husband's failure to provide her with these things is proof that he is not a man.

Muhando's sharpest attack on women who put material things before family welfare comes through Mama Kona's attitude towards her child as

she leaves her marital home. During the whole time she quarrels with her husband the plight of Kona is very far from her mind. In fact, she only remembers him as an afterthought when she has already started leaving. And when she remembers him, she is grateful that he is not nearby to see her leave:

(Achukua mizigo yake na kuanza kuondoka. Afikapo mlangoni asimama ghafla kama amekumbuka kitu-)  
(Aita), 'Kona! Kona! Laaa! Maskini mwanangu ninamwacha. Sijui atatunzwa vizuri maskini. Lakini nifanyete sasa? Konaa! Konaaa! Sijui kenda wapi? Lakini tena afadhali hayupo kwani ningeshindwa jinsi ya kumwambia kwaheri. Na mimi leo nimeamua kwenda sitaki kurudi tena kwa huyu bwana. Mwanangu si kitu. Atatunzwa. (Atoka) Atatunzwa!<sup>51</sup>

((She takes her luggage and starts leaving. When she reaches the door she stands as if she has remembered something-)  
(She calls) 'Kona! Kona! Nooo! My poor child; I am leaving him. I don't know whether he will be well looked after. But what can I do? Konaa! Konaaa! I don't know where he has gone. But it is good he is not around because I would have found it difficult to tell him goodbye. And today I have decided to leave; I can't come back to this man. My child is nothing. He will be looked after. (She leaves) He will be looked after'.)

Mama Kona evades her maternal duties until her son is a young adult who has now become a jailbird. Even then she is not prepared to see her contribution towards the young man's fate but shifts responsibility to Tabia, her husband's second wife, whom she now blames for having bewitched Kona.

Tabia is portrayed as a stereotyped step-mother who is very sadistic towards her <sup>step</sup> children. This character argues that looking after Kona would be to assume other women's responsibilities. Her only concern is to urge Kona's father to punish the boy for very trivial mistakes. The playwright shows women like Tabia as products of warped



values. Like Mama Kona, Tabia sees marriage as a gateway to enjoyment of material things. She therefore sees Kona as an economic problem and hopes that he is jailed for many years so that he does not share Baba Kona's money with her.

Muhando bases her portrayal of Tabia on the oral literature narrative tradition where step-mothers are presented as sadistic and inhuman towards their step-children. These are stories which are told to educate women that their responsibilities as mothers should extend towards those children who are not their biological children. This issue was very important in the traditional setting because of the needs brought about by the extended family system. In her portrayal of Tabia, Muhando is saying that although the extended family system is dying out, women should not evade their maternal responsibilities towards children who are not their own biologically; they should strive even harder to fill the gap which is being created by the disappearance of the extended family system in order to prevent the social crisis in the urban areas where delinquent children are multiplying in numbers.

Nguzo Mama<sup>52</sup> (The mother pillar) is Muhando's major work to date. This work addresses itself more directly to women than the plays discussed above. The playwright's aim is to inspire women to recognize their importance as citizens of their nation and subsequently the significance of their contribution to national development and to their social emancipation. The playwright sees women's role in national development and their struggle towards their liberation as parallels and not as separate issues.



The events in the play revolve around the task of erecting a pillar (the mother pillar as in the title) at a fictional village known as Patata. The pillar has been donated by the people's ancestors as an initial step towards development.

The position of women of Patata is underlined right at the beginning of the play. The narrator who acts as a commentator and as the playwright's mouthpiece explains to us that women of Patata are exploited and are not regarded as human beings. This exploitation is illustrated by the men's reaction at the arrival of the pillar. The men make a dramatic about-turn and go back to their beds to continue with their sleep. After all, they argue, the pillar bears the name 'mother pillar', it belongs to women and therefore the work of putting it up rightly belongs to women.<sup>53</sup> This is the playwright's criticism of the way in which the task of nation-building or development in contemporary Africa has been left to women. The excuse that the pillar belongs to women is a very common way in which men exploit the traditional division of labour in Africa when it is convenient for them in order to evade their responsibilities.

But how are women themselves portrayed? As mentioned above, Muhando's intention in writing Nguzo Mama is to inspire women to recognize their importance in national development and to work for their liberation. The portrayal of women in the play should therefore be seen in this context. First, there is their representation through the symbol of the mother pillar and, secondly, there is their depiction through the character types based on women from various social strata.

The portrayal of women through the mother pillar aims at showing women their importance in society while their representation through character types calls on them to see their contributions to the problems they face in the task of national development and specifically to recognize their own role in the frustrations they experience for their emancipation.

Through the pillar, women are portrayed as a solid backbone for a healthy society and for social progress. This point is articulated by the voice of wisdom (La Mgambo) when it informs the people of Patata that following their failure to erect the mother pillar, the ancestors have decided to confiscate it and to give it to another community which will appreciate it and make a proper use of it. The voice asks the people of Patata a rhetorical question: 'Which house has ever stood / Without the MOTHER PILLAR?'<sup>54</sup> The feminine gender of the pillar is used deliberately to denote the importance of women in a healthy nation.

The representation of women through characters from various sections of society is far from flattering. Muhando's aim in this representation is to show the weaknesses in women which act as setbacks to their contribution to national development and to their liberation. Unity and support for one another is one element which is emphasized as crucial towards women's liberation. The women characters in this play behave in various ways which lead to disunity and hence interfere with the erection of the mother pillar.

The character representing women leaders is more interested in the prestige of the position she occupies than in the responsibilities

this position calls for. This attitude leads her to see as a threat any woman who has qualities of leadership or who may have suggestions which are more valid than hers. It is in this light that Bi Nne's antagonism against the academic Bi Nane should be seen. The latter has many useful suggestions to offer but Bi Nne rejects them indiscriminately fearing that if these suggestions are accepted, Bi Nane might prove to be a better leader and usurp the chair from her.

Lack of strong commitment to developmental tasks and to women's liberation is another area which is discussed through the characters presented in Nguzo Mama. The women are shown to let their personal interests interfere with their contributions to public tasks. The prostitute type among the characters cannot concentrate on the task at hand because she has to chase a potential customer who is passing by. And when the wife of the man notices this a fight breaks out between them and both of them abandon their public responsibilities. Here, the playwright is commenting on the way women easily fall prey to men's tactics of divide and rule which is a major obstacle to women's liberation.

Although in Nguzo Mama Muhando does not condone men for their oppression of women the playwright is more critical of women's contribution to this status quo. The portrayal of Bi Pili illustrates the playwright's view on the way in which women make themselves vulnerable to exploitation by men. Bi Pili's participation in national development and in women's liberation is hindered by her many responsibilities at home. Besides rearing children, Bi Pili is the sole breadwinner for



the family but she does not have any control over the money she earns. The money is controlled by her husband Sudi whose job is to get drunk and batter Bi Pili to ensure her subservience.

But the playwright's message is to the women represented by Bi Pili and not to the men. The observations of the narrator and Chizi the clown on Bi Pili's attitude contain the playwright's message to women who allow themselves to be exploited by men. Through the narrator, Bi Pili is satirized about her refusal to see that she ought not to be doing all the work when her husband is as able-bodied as herself.

The comments of Chizi about Bi Pili's subservience are indeed the playwright's needle piercing women to sensitize them about the importance of being aware that they are human beings who should refuse to be treated as commodities by men. It is significant that the playwright uses song for the following words from Chizi; this technique appeals to the emotions more than the use of straight speech:

Huyo Bi Pili rohani anasikitisha  
 Atakufa maskini hohehahe kama mie ...  
 Lakini yule wake mume  
 Sijui nini kamlisha  
 Kazi yote afanye Bi Pili  
 Matunda yote ale bwana Sudi ...  
 Siku moja nitamuuliza bwana Sudi  
 Dawa gani aliyompa Bi Pili  
 Ili na mie Nikibahatika  
 Mke Kujipatia awe kama Bi Pili  
 Ambaye taabu yote atakubali  
 Watoto anizalie na pia anilelee  
 Chakula anilimie na pia anipikie  
 Nguo anifulie na pombe anipatie ...<sup>55</sup>

(That woman Bi Pili troubles my heart  
 She will die a terrible death just like me ...)

But that husband of hers  
 I don't know what medicine he gave her  
 Bi Pili does all the work  
 But all the fruits are eaten by Mr Sudi ...  
 One day I'll ask Mr Sudi  
 What witchcraft he used on Bi Pili  
 So that if I too am lucky  
 I get a wife who is like Bi Pili  
 Who will carry all my problems  
 She bears children and rears them for me  
 She cultivates and cooks food for me  
 Washes my clothes and gives me beer ...)

The difference between Muhando's portrayal of women and her attitude towards the issue of women's liberation and that of male writers such as Ibrahim Ngozi<sup>56</sup> must be appreciated. Where Ngozi is pessimistic towards women's liberation, Muhando has hope that African women can be emancipated if they have a positive attitude towards themselves and if they are fully committed to their liberation.

Nguzo Mama represents Muhando's ideological stand about African women's position in society and the emancipation of women in Africa. The symbolism of the mother pillar puts forward Muhando's view that women are a very important foundation to any society. Just as a house cannot stand without a mother pillar, so society cannot progress without the support of women. In the final analysis, the playwright is calling on women to recognize their importance and work for their liberation without which they cannot contribute meaningfully to national development. Women's role in national development is given greater attention in the next section.

Women in Politics and Cultural Development: Efua Sutherland and Micere

Mugo

Efua Sutherland (F) Ghana: Edufa 1967  
Foriwa 1967  
The Marriage of Anansewa 1975

Micere Mugo (F) Kenya: Disillusioned 1976  
The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti  
1976  
The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (co-  
authored by Ngugi wa Thiong'o)  
1976

The last section of this chapter discusses the portrayal of women in political leadership and cultural development. The two female playwrights whose work is examined here have been involved, in one way or another, in the cultural development of their respective countries.

Efua Sutherland is one of Africa's best-known women dramatists. Her involvement in cultural matters dates as far back as the early 1960s in the early independence days of Ghana during the Nkrumah regime. Sutherland's close association with Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, gave her a chance to engage in projects in which she could use drama as a tool for cultural development. For example, she initiated the experimental open air theatre known as the 'Actors Centre' which was aimed at contributing towards the political and cultural emancipation of her country. For many years, Sutherland served as the head of the School of Music, Drama and Dance at the University of Ghana. This playwright is very much interested in children's literature. It was her interest in developing relevant literature for children which spurred her on the road to writing.



At the present time, after her retirement, she is involved in developing theatre for children.

Micere Mugo of Kenya has been involved in political and cultural issues both as an educationist and a writer. She was one of the staunchest supporters of the new literature syllabus in Kenya in the late 1960s and early 1970s which was aimed at decolonizing literature and introducing culturally relevant material to secondary and university students.

Mugo is very militant both as a writer and a political thinker. She is a strong supporter of the women's liberation movement in Africa. Her stand on women's issues is clear from the views she expresses in her poetry, essays and interviews. She shows particular concern over the unfortunate situation of the Kenyan woman whereby she has had no control or ownership rights over property and yet she has had to work harder than the man. In one interview, Professor Mugo has the following to say on this issue:

Most of our traditional societies were patriarchal where the man was the unquestionable boss and owner of property. This position was accentuated by colonialism and the worst thing that has ever happened is the acceptance by women of the stereotypes that men have imposed on them.<sup>57</sup>

Like Sutherland, Mugo believes that art for art's sake is irrelevant in contemporary Africa. She views serious drama as that which is geared towards influencing society to establish justice. This is explicit from the sentiments expressed in the preface to The Trial of Dedan Kimathi.<sup>58</sup>

The Marriage of Anansewa<sup>59</sup> finds its creation in Sutherland's interest in the story-telling tradition and the Ghanaian folk performances known as Mboguo. It is a reworking of one of the trickster Ananse stories in which the playwright has relocated the original story into the contemporary Ghanaian culture to make it relevant to modern audiences.

As drama for entertainment, The Marriage of Anansewa is very appealing, but as a statement of the author on cultural issues the play is extremely weak. The portrayal of women, in particular, is very disappointing, especially when one compares this play with Edufa<sup>60</sup> and Foriwa<sup>61</sup> in which the positive representation of women and their role in society leave a striking impression.

The Marriage of Anansewa is based on the bride-price tradition whereby a suitor pays some material to his future father-in-law as compensation for taking his daughter as a wife. As discussed in Chapter 1, the bride-price practice reduces women to commodities, not only from the point of view of their fathers but also from that of their husbands who henceforth regard them as beasts of burden. Like Atangana in Oyono-Mbia's Three Suitors One Husband<sup>62</sup>, Ananse takes advantage of the bride-price tradition to make as much wealth as possible out of his daughter's marriage. In both cases, the fathers do not consider the welfare or the future happiness of their daughters.

But whereas Oyono-Mbia goes beyond the mere presentation of the situation and actually criticizes the way in which the practice reduces

a woman to a commercial object, Sutherland does not even attempt to give the audience her view of this tradition. In Oyono-Mbia's play, we are persuaded to take sides with Juliette against the tradition because the young girl is portrayed as a strong woman who is conscious of the unfairness behind the tradition and who offers resistance against being treated as a commercial object. Anansewa on the other hand allows herself to be manipulated by her father and her eventual marriage to the right man is a matter of chance rather than a result of her efforts to exercise freedom of choice as is the case with Juliette.

The writing of The Marriage of Anansewa is very surprising considering Sutherland's interest in the development of a relevant Ghanaian culture and also considering her stand in the position of women. In this play she taps the traditional art of story-telling but does not attempt to relate her work to her ideological stand as a writer.

There are two possible explanations for Sutherland's approach in The Marriage of Anansewa on the one hand, and Edufa and Foriwa on the other. The first explanation is related to the playwright's concerns as a writer. As mentioned above, it was her interest in creating relevant literature for children which made Sutherland start writing. Although written later than the other two plays, The Marriage of Anansewa may have been written only with the idea of supplementing her poetry and short stories written earlier to serve children's readership. Yet, even with this possibility in mind, one cannot help wondering why



the playwright did not consider it necessary to think about the content of the play and the type of influence the ideas it puts forward were bound to have on children. The second explanation is based on the differing periods during which the plays are written. Although Edufa and Foriwa were not published until 1967, their first performances were in the early 1960s during Sutherland's close association with Nkrumah when Ghana's independence was in its infancy and there was a great deal of idealism about the type of nation Ghanaians wanted to build. At the writing of The Marriage of Anansewa Sutherland may, like everyone else, have lost touch with this idealism partly due to disillusionment with independence.

Sutherland's portrayal of women in Edufa and Foriwa shows her great respect for women's contribution in cultural and political development of contemporary Africa. In both works the playwright sees Africa's hope of establishing a relevant social culture as dependent on people who are committed enough to sacrifice themselves, and in this task she sees women at the forefront.

Edufa is a transposition of Euripides' Alcestis based on the Greek myth of Alcestis who offers to sacrifice herself for her husband and for the wrongs of mankind. Sutherland is not reproducing Euripides' play but she merely uses the Greek myth as a background.

Edufa examines the way in which distorted Western education and emphasis on materialism have eroded Africa of humanistic values such as altruism and respect for human life. Like Ocol in Okot p'Bitek's poem, Song of Lawino<sup>63</sup>, Edufa is used symbolically to represent the educated

African man's loss of cultural vitality. It is Edufa's loss of humanistic values which makes him demand that his wife Ampoma die for him if she truly loves him. Edufa interprets love in materialistic terms. To him love is a commodity and for it to have a meaning it has to be translated into materialistic terms; Ampoma has to lose all she has, her life, in order to demonstrate the extent of her love for Edufa.

Ampoma is portrayed as a very dignified symbolic character. She symbolizes those daughters of Africa who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for the revival and establishment of meaningful cultures in Africa. She makes a personal decision to use what starts as a trick for the good of all mankind. She transforms her act of dying for Edufa into a sacrificial death to save mankind from spiritual disintegration. Her comments reveal that she understands her husband's cultural sickness as characteristic of the contemporary African culture in general. The following statement, for example, shows her awareness of what has gone wrong and the importance of urgency in saving the situation:

We spend most of our days preventing the heart from beating out its greatness. The things we would rather encourage lie choking among the weeds of our restrictions. And before we know it, time has eluded us. There is not much time allotted us, and half of that we sleep.<sup>64</sup>

One of the major problems with educated people like Edufa who have taken western values at face value is their loss of humanity and feelings towards those among whom they live. The way in which they relate to others is egoistic and is calculated to fit in with their distorted world view. This is the way in which Edufa relates to his wife Ampoma

and there is a parallel between this relationship and that between Ocol and Lawino in Okot p'Bitek's poem.

Like Okot in Song of Lawino, Sutherland uses the loss of manhood metaphorically as a statement on educated Africans' cultural emasculation through superficial assimilation of Western values. In this regard, the waistbeads which Ampoma gives Edufa before her death as a token of love : a symbol representing sacrificial actions which lead to the re-establishment of Africa's cultural vitality. Ampoma uses the beads as a fuse to ignite the fire of human warmth into her husband and his contemporaries who have lost their spiritual selves through materialism and other superficial aspects of the Western culture. Ampoma uses the gesture of giving a love token to articulate what Lawino pleads that the ancestors do for her husband Ocol who is suffering from the same cultural disease as Edufa. Notice the use of phallic symbolism in Lawino's song:

Give blood to your ancestors ...  
 Ask for a spear that you will trust  
 One that does not bend easily  
 Like the earthworm.<sup>65</sup>

In her portrayal of Ampoma, Sutherland shows similar respect for African women ~~to~~ that shown by Okot in his portrayal of Lawino. Both women are depicted as people who are concerned with the welfare of others as contrasted with their husbands who only think about themselves and their narrow views on life. They even have a maternal attitude towards their husbands; they regard them as prodigal sons and they are prepared to work hard for their return to the right cultural path.



Sutherland's belief in the importance of women's cultural contribution is illustrated further by her portrayal of old Seguwa as well as through her presentation of the chorus of women. Seguwa is unlike a stereotyped female servant. She is presented as a wise old woman who, like Ampoma, is against a culture which disregards life and human feelings. It is in an attempt to have Edufa's heartlessness neutralized that she rebels against the latter's orders and allows his father to try and break Edufa's coldness.

The chorus of women play more than the theatrical role of providing music and dance for the play. They understand the deep implications of Edufa's trick of demanding that Ampoma die for him. To the chorus, Edufa's 'murder' of Ampoma is not just an act of murdering an individual; it is indicative of the impending death of a whole society, the murder of a culture. This is the implication of their words:

Crying the death day of another  
Is crying your own death day.  
While we mourn for another  
We mourn for ourselves.  
One's death is the death of all mankind.  
Comfort! Comfort to us all,  
Comfort.<sup>66</sup>

In purging the town of evil, the chorus compliments Ampoma's choice to die for mankind; they attempt to clean up the city of distorted values which throttle life, so that Ampoma's act can find meaning.

The portrayal of women in Sutherland's Foriwa shows the playwright's indebtedness to her Fante matrilineal cultural background where women command greater power than in the patrilineal societies. Both Queen Mother and her daughter Foriwa are very strong women and have tremendous

influence on the men with whom they work. But, as can be observed from the old Sintim's hostile attitude towards Queen Mother, the play is based on general African communities in which conservative men do not readily accept women's leadership. The success of the two women in winning the respect of the male citizens is due not only to their determination but also to the selfless nature of their leadership. Their portrayal illustrates Sutherland's strong belief in women's potential in leadership which is dedicated to the advancement of society rather than to personal aggrandizement.

Queen Mother is an embodiment of Sutherland's idea about the answer to Africa's transitional cultural problems, viz., a synthesis between what is vital from the traditional African culture and what is relevant from the Western culture. Queen Mother combines her traditional royalty with Western education. Notice, from Sintim's attitude, the playwright's criticism of men who feel threatened by educated women.

Queen Mother's leadership is distinguished by her commitment to real down-to-earth cultural progress for her community as opposed to meaningless personal pomp and exhibitionism. It is this dedication to meaningful progress which makes her disregard the usual props and customary jargon at the festival and instead conduct the ceremony in a way which initiates new life at Kyerefaso. Her strength and determination as a leader make her risk her people's rebellion when she topples their expectations at the festival. But her people cannot help being moved to shame after her convincing outline of their shortcomings in building their community; they have engaged in words rather

than deeds. Queen Mother attacks this superficial progress when she tells the people at the festival:

Sitting here, seeing Kyerefaso die, I am no longer able to bear the mockery of the fine, brave words of this ceremony of our festival. Our fathers earned the right to utter them by their deeds. They found us the land, protected it, gave us a system of living. Praise to them. Yes. But is this the way to praise them? Watching their walls crumbling around us? ... Unwilling to open new paths ourselves, because it demands of us thought and goodwill and action? No, we have turned Kyerefaso into a death bed from which our young people run away to seek elsewhere, the promise of life we've failed to give them here.<sup>67</sup>

Queen Mother's confidence as she shakes idleness out of her people so that they can engage themselves in meaningful progress at Kyerefaso wins her even the support of the old Sintim, the representative of the conservative males who hitherto have been opposed to a woman's leadership. It is also Queen Mother's impact at the festival which makes Foriwa decide to leave her teaching job away from Kyerefaso and join in the development projects here.

Like Queen Mother, Foriwa is portrayed as an embodiment of Sutherland's idea of progress. Foriwa represents the younger generation of women who have to continue with the work of development started off by Queen Mother and her generation. More than a representative, Foriwa is presented as a symbol of the future progressive culture.

Foriwa is for down-to-earth meaningful progress rather than the superficial exhibitionist progress. It is in this spirit that she rejects entering into marriage with the wealthy Anipare. The latter, like Edufa in the play discussed above, represents the nouveaux-riches



whose values about life are distorted; they judge human beings and human relationships in material terms. Foriwa's rejection of him and his wealth is therefore a rejection of these values and her choice of Labaran instead of Anipare shows the extent of her dedication to meaningful and selfless development.

On a superficial level, Labaran has very little to offer as compared to Anipare; he is poor and he is also a foreigner at Kyerefaso. But as far as development is concerned, he has a wealth of potential to offer. He is educated where Anipare is not, and in addition, he is committed to use this education for development projects that are beneficial to the community. In this light, he is the male counterpart of Foriwa as a representative of the future generation on whose shoulders the task of Africa's progress lies.

The marriage between Labaran and Foriwa represents Sutherland's idea of the role of men and women in Africa's post-independence cultural development. This marriage symbolizes the co-operation of men and women which Sutherland views as crucial to the development of her country and that of other African states.

The presentation of the relationship between Labaran and Foriwa offers an illustration of the difference between the depiction of the co-operation of men and women by female playwrights and that by their male counterparts. The male writers tend to emphasize the sexual relationship, sometimes at the expense of the ideological. This is the case with, for example, the presentation of Segi and Daodu in Wole Soyinka's Kongi's Harvest.<sup>68</sup> In Sutherland's play, there is no

emphasis on a sexual relationship and the imminent marriage of the characters is clearly presented as symbolic of the future which their co-operation will produce.

Micere Mugo's heroines are characterized by their sense of freedom and militancy against oppression and injustice. This is a trait which is a direct result of this playwright's world view and attitude towards her environment. As mentioned above, Micere Mugo is very militant both as a writer and a political thinker; in her plays she often uses her female characters as her mouthpieces to question any oppressive status quo.

One of the themes examined in The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti<sup>69</sup> is that of cultural conflict and the generation gap between mothers and daughters. Unlike her mother and the latter's co-wives, who were brought up in a traditional environment, Pesa is introduced to new values in the Western school. Although she is a mere teenage school-girl, Pesa is very sharp and is aware of the antagonism between the culture taught to girls at home and the new values taught at school. The scope of the play does not allow for the development of Pesa's character, but the glimpse we have of her indicates that she is far from growing into the submissive and unquestioning woman her parents want to mould her into. She is against the way in which traditions such as respect for one's elders are used to deny a girl independence of thought and sense of justice. She says:

That is the trouble with this home. When one person does wrong, everyone else gets included ... At school we are

taught to question everything we don't understand. But if one says anything in this home, one is told not to argue with one's elders.<sup>70</sup>

Pesa's search for freedom and independence of thought reminds the audience of Anowa in Aidoo's play examined above. Anowa's major conflict with those around her is that she has a great sense of independence.

Sister Immaculate, in Mugo's Disillusioned<sup>71</sup> is as militant as Pesa in her search for freedom. She refuses to be dissuaded from her decision to leave the ~~convent~~ because she has seen the hypocrisy behind which the White Sisters have built their order in Africa. Her questioning attitude towards the hypocrisy, discrimination and lack of freedom in the nunnery is similar to that of Pesa towards the status quo in her home. Explaining her decision to leave the nunnery Sister Immaculate tells the bishop:

Your Lordship, my main objection is hypocrisy in a lot of the things that I am required to just accept without questioning. For instance, I was astounded by the amount of freedom that the nuns have in France ... Right here in our own country and even in this very convent, it seems that the white nuns have more privileges than the Africans ... Where is love in this convent, for instance? Going out for social work in the villages and on return speaking nothing but bad about the African way of life? This is condescension - loud love that is empty and poisonous. I can no longer be part of it.<sup>72</sup>

The fighting spirit in Mugo's women finds greater meaning in the portrayal of Woman and Girl in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi.<sup>73</sup> This play is based on the Kenyan war of liberation from colonial oppression, but the authors have broadened the scope to knit their examination of this struggle with the struggle against contemporary neocolonial problems.



On both levels, women's contribution is given significant recognition and is shown to be crucial for the success of the freedom fighters.

Like Sutherland in Foriwa Mugo and Ngugi present two generations of women in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. The role of women in colonial and neocolonial revolutionary struggles is discussed through Woman while the role of the future generation of women freedom fighters is discussed through Girl. The representation of women through these two characters illustrates the tremendous respect the authors have towards women's potential as participants in revolutionary struggles. Unlike the female characters in Kenneth Watene's Dedan Kimathi<sup>74</sup> who are presented as sex objects for the male freedom fighters, the female characters in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi are presented as fighters in their own right and not merely as inferior supporters of the male guerrillas.

The meticulous portrayal of Woman indicates the playwrights' concern about projecting a positive image of the women she represents. Notice this from the way in which she is introduced:

It is now proper daylight. A woman walks across the stage. She is between thirty and forty years of age, with a mature but youthful face, strongly built. Goodlooking. She wears a peasant woman's clothes and is barefoot. Though apparently a simple peasant, the woman is obviously world-wise, and perceptive of behaviour and society. Throughout, her actions are under control: her body and mind are fully alert.

Fearless determination and a spirit of daring is her character. She is versatile and full of energy in her responses to different roles and situations. A mother, a fighter, all in one!<sup>75</sup>

As a fighter, Woman is shown to be fearless, tactful, determined and fully committed to the struggle. Her consciousness of the aims of

the struggle contrasts sharply with the naivety and pettiness of the women in Watene's play. She is deeply aware of the manifestations of the colonial and neocolonial forces against which the workers are fighting. Where Watene's women use their beauty and charm to win the sexual attention of the male freedom fighters and subsequently to distract these men from the struggle, Woman uses her good looks and versatility to distract the enemy and to adapt to the changing circumstances in the struggle.

On a symbolic level, Woman plays the role of a revolutionary mother. This is the basis of her relationship with Boy and Girl. She initiates them into the struggle and teaches them the various tactics and attitudes they should assume towards the fight. It is significant that Woman is the character who articulates the ideology behind the struggle through the words she uses to initiate Boy as a freedom fighter. In view of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi as revolutionary drama, the repetition of Woman's words in Boy's mind is aimed, not only at illustrating her influence on the younger generation, but also at mobilising the audience to move to the side of the fighters. Woman's words are a powerful creed of the struggle; she tells Boy:

The day you will understand why your father died: the day you ask yourself whether it was right for him to die so; the day you ask yourself: 'What can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstances?' that day, my son, you'll become a man.<sup>76</sup>

It can be noted from Woman's emphasis here that her maternal relationships with other workers go beyond the general expectations. She is a woman who is dedicated to the protection of life on a social



rather than on a narrow personal level. Like Seguwa and the chorus of women in Sutherland's Edufa, Woman is anti-death. Her major objective in joining in the struggle is to see that justice is established in order to protect workers from exploitation and unnecessary deaths.

There is a significant difference between the portrayal of Woman in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi and the Woman in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Mother Sing for Me.<sup>77</sup> Although both characters are used as symbols to represent the playwrights' views on women's role in revolutionary struggles, the Woman of the former play leaves a more striking impression. This is because unlike Woman in Mother Sing for Me, who operates only on a metaphysical level, the Woman in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi operates on both the metaphysical and the physical levels. The audience can actually see her mingling with the other fighters and carrying out her duties of a guerrilla while at the same time she plays her symbolic role. This difference can be explained by the fact that where Mother Sing for Me is the work of Ngugi on his own, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is co-authored by a woman. Being a woman, Mugo was able to put herself in the position of Woman of the latter play and project both the latter's essence and existence in a way which was difficult for Ngugi on his own in Mother Sing for Me.

Girl is the younger version of Woman as a future fighter and revolutionary mother. She is portrayed as fearless and full of remarkable determination. After her initiation into the struggle, she becomes a fighter in her own right; and not an inferior complement to Boy. From a relationship of war and hatred with Boy, Girl becomes the



younger version of revolutionary mother to Boy, challenging him and urging him not to give up the struggle when he tends to waver. Between Boy and Girl, the latter is overtly the stronger and the more courageous. It would appear that this is a deliberate attempt by the playwrights to demolish the myth of female inferiority and cowardice.

The contrast which was observed above between the portrayal of Woman in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi and Woman in Mother Sing for Me is noticeable in the case of Girl and Nyathira, in the two plays, respectively. Girl is a much stronger character than Nyathira. She is independent and has a great deal of confidence where Nyathira is often dependent on Kariuki (Boy's counterpart in Mother Sing for Me) and emerges as an inferior supporter of the latter.

Apart from her role in the revolutionary struggle, Girl is used to criticize men's oppression of women. It is her history of victimization by men which leads Girl into becoming militant and eventually joining the revolutionary struggle. She talks about this oppression when she says:

All my life I have been running. On the run. On the road. Men molesting me. I was once a dutiful daughter. A nice Christian home. It was in the settled area ... I ran away from school because the headmaster wanted to do wicked things with me. Always: you remain behind. You take the wood to my house. You take this chalk and books to the office. Then he would follow me and all he wanted was to touch my breasts. So, I left school. I wanted to stay home and teach myself how to sew or do something with my life. But my father would have nothing of it. He called me an idler and sent me to pick tea leaves for that cruel settler, Mr Jones. How he used to abuse and punish us! I had to run away from home, from my father, from Mr Jones ... In the city it was the boys. Always harrassing me ... And yet I did not want to starve! I lost my virginity while trying to run away from losing it.

How else could I live? Yet the money was so miserable. And sometimes they would beat me afterwards, calling me a child.<sup>78</sup>

The scope of The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, however, does not allow for the development of the theme of male oppression on women and therefore it is only touched on in passing. Perhaps the playwrights saw a danger in dwelling a great deal on this theme; it would have somehow undermined the theme of co-operation of men and women which the playwrights emphasize as crucial to the success of the liberation struggle.

This chapter has discussed the portrayal of female characters by five major women playwrights. It was observed that a writer's ideological stand has a bearing on the type of drama she writes and on her portrayal of characters. The plays of 'Zulu Sofola are very weak as literature for social criticism because the playwright seems unclear about her concerns as a writer. Sofola does not take a specific stand on either ideology or gender politics.

The other four writers are staunch supporters of the cause of women and in this light their drama is populated by very strong female characters. Aidoo's drama revolves around the conflict between strong heroines in search of freedom and the societies in which they live.

Mhando's female characters are sometimes victims of social and economic inequalities. The author uses them to criticize elements in contemporary Tanzania which undermine the position of women. At other times her female characters are victims of the playwright's dissatisfaction with women's contribution to the attainment of their emancipation. She depicts the African woman as contributing to the problems which hinder her emancipation.

Mugo and Sutherland write socialist realist theatre. Their female characters are often symbols of these playwrights' ideas on women's potential in political and cultural development of contemporary Africa.

The major difference between the five female playwrights and the male playwrights discussed in Chapter 4 is that the former authors portray female characters more realistically than the latter because they are able to empathize with these characters in a way which is difficult for their male counterparts.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

- 1 'Zulu Sofola interviewed, in Conversations with African Writers (ed.) by Lee Nichols, Washington, 1981, pp.266-77; (p.268).
- 2 Ama Ata Aidoo interviewed, in African Writers Talking by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, London, Heinemann, 1972, p.22.
- 3 'Zulu Sofola, Wedlock of the Gods, London, Evans Brothers Ltd., 1972. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 4 Ibid., p.28.
- 5 See, for example, Ndeti in his book, Elements of Akamba Life, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1972.
- 6 Op.cit., p.22.
- 7 Ibid., p.8.
- 8 Ibid., p.20.
- 9 Ama Ata Aidoo, Anowa, London, Longmans, 1970. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 10 'Zulu Sofola, King Emene, London, Heinemann, 1974. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 11 Op.cit., p.16.
- 12 Ibid., pp.22-3.
- 13 Ibid., p.41.
- 14 Consider, for example, the attitude of the king's chief wife towards Asari Amansa in Henshaw's Children of the Goddess, as examined in Chapter 3.
- 15 Op.cit., p.44.
- 16 Ibid., p.2.
- 17 Ama Ata Aidoo, Dilemma of a Ghost, Accra, Longmans, 1966. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 18 Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi,

- Nairobi, Heinemann, 1976; 1984 reprint. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 19 Efua Sutherland, Foriwa, Accra, State Publishing Corporation, 1967. All references and quotations are from this edition.
  - 20 Op.cit., pp.35-6.
  - 21 Aloys Odhiambo, Odanga's Flower, unpublished play, Nairobi, 1982. For detailed analysis of this play, see Chapter 3.
  - 22 J.E. Henshaw, Children of the Goddess, London, University of London Press, 1964.
  - 23 Op.cit.
  - 24 Ibid., p.40.
  - 25 Ibid., p.64.
  - 26 Ibid., p.41.
  - 27 Ibid., p.10.
  - 28 Ibid., p.33.
  - 29 Zegoua (Charles) Nokan, Abraha Poukou ou Une Grande Africaine, Paris, Paris-Honfleur: J.P. Oswald, 1972. For detailed analysis of this play, see Chapter 3.
  - 30 Op.cit., p.36.
  - 31 Ibid., p.46.
  - 32 See, for example, Michael Etherton, The Development of African Theatre, London, Anchor Press, 1982, p.237.
  - 33 Op.cit., p.61.
  - 34 Ibid., p.64.
  - 35 Op.cit., p.234.
  - 36 Penina Muhando, interviewed in Conversations with African Writers, op.cit., pp.138-49; p.140.
  - 37 Penina Muhando, Hatia (Guilty), Nairobi, East African Publishing House. All references and quotations are from this edition.
  - 38 Penina Muhando, Heshima Yangu (My honour), Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1974. All references and quotations are from this edition.

- 39 Penina Muhando, Talaka Si Mke Wangu (I divorce you), in Michezo ya Kuigiza (ed.) by J.M. Mbonde, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania Publishing House, 1976. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 40 Penina Muhando, Nguzo Mama (The mother pillar), Dar-es-Salaam, Dar-es-Salaam University Press, 1982. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 41 Op.cit., p.10.
- 42 Translations from Kiswahili into English on this and other texts are mine.
- 43 Op.cit., p.38.
- 44 Jesse Mollel, 'The Drama of Penina Muhando', M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1979.
- 45 Ujamaa villages are communal units which were established with Tanzania's move to the left after the 'Arusha Declaration' of 1967.
- 46 Op.cit.
- 47 Although among many traditional peoples of Africa the term 'illegitimate' does not exist, a male child born out of wedlock who is not adopted by his biological father experiences discrimination. In some cultures he is referred to as a 'fatherless child' or 'the child who came with his mother'. These terms have negative connotations.
- 48 Op.cit., p.19.
- 49 Op.cit.
- 50 Op.cit.
- 51 Op.cit., p.99.
- 52 Op.cit.
- 53 Ibid., p.6.
- 54 Ibid., p.45.
- 55 Ibid., pp.48-9.
- 56 See, for example, his Machochi ya Mwanamke (A woman's tears) in Chapter 4.



- 57 'A Talk with a Woman Professor who is Everyone's Choice', The Daily Nation (Nairobi, April 2, 1982), p.15.
- 58 Op.cit.
- 59 Efua Sutherland, The Marriage of Anansewa, London, Longmans, 1975. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 60 Efua Sutherland, Edufa, London, Longmans, 1967. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 61 Op.cit.
- 62 Guillaume Oyono-Mbia, Three Suitors One Husband and Until Further Notice, London, Methuen, 1968.
- 63 Okot p'Bitek, Song of Lawino, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1966.
- 64 Op.cit., p.53.
- 65 Op.cit., pp.212-3.
- 66 Op.cit., p.25.
- 67 Op.cit., pp.50-1.
- 68 Wole Soyinka, Kongi's Harvest, London, OUP, 1967.
- 69 Micere Mugo, The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti, Nairobi, Kenya Literature Bureau, 1976. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 70 Ibid., pp.26-7.
- 71 Micere Mugo, Disillusioned, in The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti, op.cit., pp.62-82. All references and quotations are from this edition.
- 72 Ibid., p.69.
- 73 Op.cit.
- 74 Kenneth Watene, Dedan Kimathi, Nairobi, Transafrica Publishers Ltd., 1974.
- 75 Op.cit., p.8.
- 76 Ibid., pp.19-41.

- 77 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Mother Sing for Me, a working copy translated by the author from the original, Maitu Njugira, undated (?1982).
- 78 Op.cit., p.41.

## CONCLUSION

In the last decade or so the position of women has generated a great deal of interest internationally, both as a political concern and an academic issue. In various academic disciplines, there is an increasing enthusiasm in studying the position of the African woman, in particular. The question which arises from this study is whether African drama as a literary genre has managed to keep abreast with the general wave of attention on the position of women. A look at the selection of plays examined here reveals that a significant amount of work is needed in the writing of relevant plays if drama is to contribute to the emancipation of African women.

There are a considerable number of important areas in African women's experience which playwrights have ignored. For example, the recognition given to women's contribution to Africa's cultural development in general, struggles for political independence and contemporary class struggles is negligible. Where are the plays projecting a positive image of the African woman's political contributions to African history in the pre-colonial times? Where are the plays on the position of African women during the pre-colonial slave-raids? Where are the plays celebrating the Algerian women's important role in their country's fierce seven years' war against the French colonialists? Where are the plays highlighting the role of women like Winnie Mandela in inspiring fellow freedom fighters against apartheid in South Africa?



Where is the drama depicting women's commitment to the national ideals of post-independence Africa? For instance, is the political role of market women in independent Ghana during Nkrumah's era not appropriate material for African theatre? What about the role of performers of traditional dances (most of whom are women) in propagating ideals on national unity and national development in post-independence Africa?

African theatre is too complacent about the underprivileged position of women in contemporary Africa. One of the major reasons why there is so much discrimination against women on the national level is because there are very few women's voices heard at the policy making forums in Africa. The percentage of women parliamentarians in independent Africa, for example, is below 3% and the percentage is even lower for women cabinet ministers. The minimal influence of women at the policy-making level leads to lack of concern about women's issues and hence to the creation of a vicious circle in the position of African women in society. As long as there is discrimination against women when appointments for key governmental positions are made, the tendency to consider women second for educational opportunities continues, and in turn, the excuse that women are not educated enough to handle certain public responsibilities is boosted. These are some of the areas in which African drama could help propagate ideas about the position of African women.

Most of the plays examined in this study are by men. The question which arises is whether women are not interested in creative writing in general and in the theatre specifically. There is a significant number

of plays by women writers in this study to indicate that women are interested in theatre although the number of works by female playwrights is too small compared to those by men. The nature of drama as a genre can explain why women have not written as much as the men. The writing of plays requires more space in terms of place and time, much more than, say, prose fiction and poetry. For a play to be ready for publication, it has to go through a longer process than these other literary genres since it needs to be checked on its theatrical appeal besides its literary merit. The social position of women in Africa has constraints which lead to a limitation on the time and space they can afford for publication of plays.

A limitation on plays by women means a limitation on women's views about their position. The minor playwrights whose works are discussed in Chapters 1 to 3 have a tendency to imitate male writers because they are not confident in the art of playwriting. This imitation in turn affects their attitudes towards women and their portrayal of female characters. The works of most amateur female playwrights indicate that they are not conscious of gender politics and hence they have no overt support for women's cause. In comparison, the women playwrights examined in Chapter 5 who are more experienced in the art of playwriting and have clear ideological stands use drama as a tool for putting forward their views on the position of African women. Secondly, their portrayal of female characters shows their conscious effort to correct the distorted image of the African woman projected through chauvinistic attitudes.

It would be a misrepresentation of the actual situation in African drama to argue that men are not sympathetic towards the position of women in Africa. A considerable number of male playwrights examined in this study are sensitive to the plight of African women and they make a conscious effort to contribute to the body of literature aimed at criticising those elements in African cultures which undermine women's position in society. However, it would be an oversight not to comment on the limitations of the male playwrights writing about women's experiences. Our observation throughout this study is that male writers have problems writing about women's experiences. Having not had the experiences or the chance to envisage undergoing the experiences with which women are confronted, these male playwrights find it more difficult to empathize with female characters than their women counterparts. Even when a male writer is sympathetic towards women he has a tendency to write from a man's viewpoint and this interferes with his presentation of women's problems.

African literature is functional and it has to adapt its themes to the needs of the contemporary society. The theme of liberation and social justice has always been a very central one in African literature. It is high time that the liberation of the African woman was taken more seriously as an integral part of the role of literature in social development. This is particularly important considering that women form over 50% of Africa's population and are an indispensable backbone of African nations.

Drama is a very effective tool of communicating ideas and



influencing thought. Unlike other literary genres it appeals to various senses simultaneously. Its role in disseminating information does not depend solely on the written word. In Africa, therefore, drama assumes greater relevance because the majority of the people, particularly the women, are not literate. It is necessary therefore, as the position of women in Africa gains greater socio-political recognition, for playwrights to respond more positively and create works which are more overtly sensitive to the plight of African women. It is necessary, above all, for African women in particular to face the challenges involved in play-writing and take advantage of this powerful genre to contribute to their emancipation.

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